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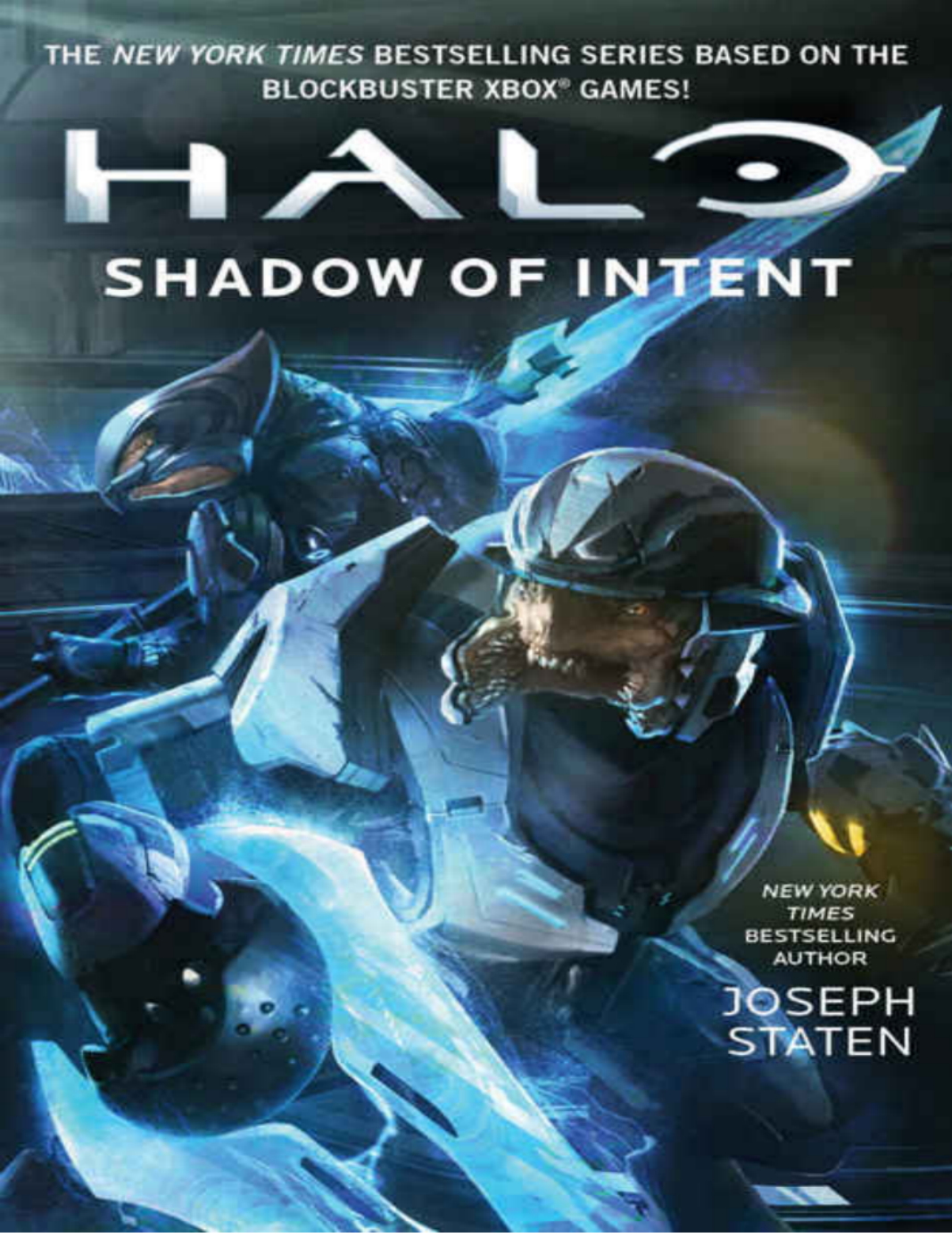

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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HALO

SHADOW OF INTENT

JOSEPH STATEN

BASED ON THE BESTSELLING VIDEO GAME FOR XBOX

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For my brother, Ben, and his keen editorial pen.

The longer the countdown went, the more the bunker smelled like fear.

The Prelate scowled at the two Jiralhanae looming beside him. One was covered with rust-red hair, and the other with dirty white. Both warriors were so tall that they had to duck their helmeted heads to keep from banging them on the bunker's low, flat ceiling. The thickly muscled, sharp-toothed Brutes stood still and silent, like monuments to violence. But all male Jiralhanae were prone to pungent pheromones that mirrored their emotions, and now, so close to the activation of the device, these usually fearless creatures' panicked stench permeated the cramped, dark room.

The Prelate, Tem'Bhetek, wanted to shout a reprimand. He had handpicked the two Jiralhanae for their strength and mental fortitude. And besides: they were adults, certainly mature enough to regulate their pheromones. But Tem held his tongue, partly because he didn't want to startle the insectile Yanme'e nervously monitoring the device's final activation sequence, but mostly because the Prelate knew the Jiralhanae weren't the real cause of his slowly building rage.

As much as the Prelate's nostrils recoiled at his warriors' sharp, sour scent, it was the noise filling his lobeless ears that made him truly angry. A noise that rose over the rapid clicking of the Yanme'e's claws on the luminous glyphs shining through the surface of the bunker's obsidian walls. A noise that muted the rumble of the device in the test chamber many levels above. A noise so infuriating that the Prelate finally broke his silence with a strangled hiss: "Why would they *sing* at a time like this?"

The Minister of Preparation shrugged inside his dark orange robes. His high, thin voice was full of concentration. "We never understood each other. Not really."

Both the Minister and the Prelate were San'Shyuum, hairless, slick-skinned creatures with elongated necks that thrust forward from between their shoulders. They shared their species' large, amphibian

eyes. But the Prelate's eyes were two different colors: one dark green and the other deep blue. Considered auspicious in earlier ages, this trait now marked the Prelate as a member of a genetic line that was overbred and out of fashion.

The Minister, Boru'a'Neem, was two decades older than the Prelate, violet-eyed with a pronounced waddle of fleshy sacks that dangled from his chin. The two had the same pale gray skin, but the Minister's was deeply wrinkled and bunched down his skull and along his neck like the meat of a freshly shelled nut. In the tradition of most San'Shyuum of his age and exalted rank, the Minister sat hunched in a bowl-shaped titanium throne that floated above the floor with the help of embedded anti-gravity units. The Prelate stood on his own two feet, his broad shoulders and wiry arms held tight against his black tunic as he glared past the Minister at a holographic projector integrated into the bunker's primary control surface.

There, in a flickering pillar of lavender light, were the small-scale images of three Sangheili warriors, stripped of their armor and kneeling with their arms bound behind their backs. The Prelate knew the display was one-way; the Sangheili in the test chamber couldn't see or hear anything inside the bunker. But their leader, a muscular, middle-aged warrior with light brown skin and bright amber eyes, stared directly at the recording unit, proud and unafraid, as he led his companions in song.

"Do you know the words?" the Minister asked.

"I do not," replied the Prelate.

"Sangheili, to be sure, but they have so many dialects. Perhaps it's a battle anthem. . . ." The Minister's voice trailed off as a line of glyphs scrolled rapidly across the control surface. His fingers fluttered against the intricate symbols, rotating them back and forth to fine-tune the device's charging sequence. "No matter. This will be their final verse."

The Sangheili hadn't sung at first. Indeed, the two younger warriors had bellowed in pain when the Jiralhanae slashed the tendons above their large cloven feet to bring them to their knees, a practical cruelty to keep them from moving too far from the device. The Sangheili leader had said nothing, barely moving his four interlocking jawbones when the Jiralhanae made their cuts. When this stoic Elite refused to

fall, the Prelate ordered his Jiralhanae to smash his knees with their armored fists—but, even then, the amber-eyed warrior hadn't said a word.

It wasn't until power began to surge to the device, and the younger Sangheili had begun to groan with fear, that their elder finally cleared his throat and started singing. Soon all three were joined in defiant harmony.

The Prelate clenched his fists. *I should have ordered my Jiralhanae to cut their throats as well*. But the Minister had been clear: the test would be worthless if the Sangheili were already dead when he activated the device.

Near the Minister, the last of the glyphs pulsed and stabilized. The walls of the bunker began to vibrate as the device held its charge. The Jiralhanae growled and the Yanme'e chittered in anticipation as the Minister lifted a single, long finger . . . and gently pressed the static surface of the final glyph.

The Prelate had expected a sound, something spectacularly loud when the device fired. But instead there was a deafening silence; an aural vacuum that seemed to pull every other sound into it. The growling, clicking, singing—even the Prelate's surprised intake of breath—were sucked out of existence as the holographic view of the test chamber filled with blinding light.

And yet, as the light faded, a ghostly chorus remained. An echo of the Sangheili song rang in the Prelate's ears for the long minutes it took the Yanme'e to deactivate all the bunker's warning and containment systems. Then the Minister led them all through a series of thick, saw-toothed shield doors to a gravity lift that whisked them up to the test chamber, where they inspected what remained of the Sangheili.

"Nothing, in fact," the Minister of Preparation said, carefully inspecting an analysis of the chamber's air, scrolling up the arm of his throne. "I would say vaporized. But that would mean trace particles remain." One corner of the Minister's wide mouth curled into a smile. "They are, simply, gone."

The Prelate watched as the Yanme'e fluttered on iridescent wings around the device: a ring of marbled onyx, ten meters high and

honeycombed with glinting circuits.

The ring stood in the middle of the test chamber, a long room with white, pearlescent walls that angled together high above. This place and everything in it was the creation of the Forerunners: an ancient, vanished race that both the San'Shyuum and Sangheili worshipped as gods—or, rather, used to. For while their shared faith had been the foundation of the Covenant, this millennia-old alliance between the San'Shyuum and Sangheili was recently and irreversibly broken. The device, a miniature version of one of the Forerunners' seven sacred Halo rings, no longer held any religious significance for the Prelate. Now it was an object to be feared, not revered. And he truly hoped the three Sangheili warriors had felt terror before the end.

"My lord," the rust-haired Jiralhanae asked the Minister, his gruff voice halting and unsure, "is it possible, perhaps, that the prisoners could have—"

"Their journey was short and led to nowhere," the Prelate snapped. "Signal the ship and tell them it's safe to approach. Once we're aboard, we depart immediately."

The Jiralhanae shared a dissatisfied glance with his white-haired companion, but they both bowed their heads and retreated from the test chamber across the stretch of floor where the Sangheili used to be. The Prelate noted that even the pools of indigo blood from the Sangheili's wounds were gone, and the Jiralhanae's shaggy feet left no prints as they walked the length of the chamber and disappeared into a passage beyond.

"They refuse to understand, no matter how many times I tell them," the Prelate said.

"Can you blame them?" the Minister replied. "The Jiralhanae's belief in the Forerunners was stronger than that of anyone in the Covenant. In less than three ages, we lifted them from savagery to starships. They believed—as we all once did—that the Halo rings would open the path to godhood." He waved a hand over the arm of his throne, blanking the test results. "Do you remember what the Prophet of Truth used to say?"

With as much calm as he could muster, Tem'Bhetek recited one of the deceased Covenant leader's better-known aphorisms: "There is

nothing stronger than the conviction of the newly converted."

Boru'a'Neem settled deeper into his throne. His reedy voice was tired, but his words still had all the precision of a practiced politician. "Truth said and did many unfortunate things, but he was right about the Jiralhanae. They will do anything you command, so long as they believe. And while this test may have shaken what remains of their faith in the Great Journey, it has proven, without a doubt, the validity of our plan and the clarity of our purpose."

The Prelate stared hard at the miniature Halo.

Revenge.

In a flutter of waxy wings, the Yanme'e pulled away from the ring. The Prelate could see a large crack in one of its marbled veins where some of the embedded circuits had burned away. Yanme'e were clever, and in swarms even more so, but this damage far exceeded their technical ability. The Drones hovered nervously until the Minister released them with a swift hand signal, and then they buzzed down a wide shaft behind the ring to examine how the Forerunner power systems buried deeper in the installation had weathered the test-firing.

When they had arrived here, many weeks ago, the Minister of Preparation had painstakingly trained the Yanme'e in their tasks. But the truth was not even Boru'a'Neem, a San'Shyuum renowned for his ability to pick apart and repurpose Forerunner relics, truly understood how this particular device worked. Until recently, the Halo rings had been legend—articles of faith, not something anyone in the Covenant had ever seen. It was only after a Halo had been found and activated, briefly, that this installation and others like it had revealed themselves on the Luminaries and other scanning equipment of Covenant deep-space survey ships.

"If only Truth had told me about this installation sooner. . . ." The Minister tugged at one of the many loose threads in his robe. The heavy garment was embellished with platinum brocade that used to dazzle but was now grimy and tattered. They had been on the run ever since the fall of the holy city, High Charity, several months ago. The Minister hadn't slept for days as he prepared to test-fire the device, and now some of the Prelate's anger crept into Boru'a'Neem's

voice as he considered the ring with his weary eyes. “I could have transported this prototype to High Charity—brought all the resources of my Sacred Promissory to bear! But that’s all gone now. Wasted.”

The Prelate flinched, seized with a sudden sadness. He heard the faint echo of a different song. . . .

The Minister softened his tone. “Forgive me, Tem’Bhetek. My losses were nothing compared to yours.”

“Many died that day, my lord.”

“But I did not. And for that, I am forever in your debt.”

The Minister dipped his long neck and head, tipping slightly forward in his throne. The Prelate bowed in response, although muscle memory encouraged him to kneel. According to the old Covenant hierarchy, the Minister Boru’a’Neem was many times his better. Tem’Bhetek was a soldier, the Minister’s sworn protector. But after Tem had accomplished their escape from High Charity, Boru’a’Neem had made things clear: they were now partners, with different but equally important parts to play in the execution of their plan.

“Bring the Half-Jaw and his ship to me,” the Minister said. He nudged his throne close to the Prelate, reached up, and placed his hands on the younger San’Shyuum’s shoulders. “And I promise: we will make the Sangheili pay for everything they have done.”

From orbit, Rahnelo looked pristine. While the planet had a thin equatorial band of deep greens and golden browns, it cooled rapidly as it arced toward its poles, and its caps were icy blue. Bathed in the light of its star, the frozen Sangheili colony world sparkled as it spun about its axis. The effect was breathtakingly beautiful, and staring down at Rahnelo from a distance of a few hundred kilometers, it was easy to get distracted. But distraction was exactly what the Half-Jaw wanted.

Since his Phantom dropship had begun its descent, the Half-Jaw, Rtas ‘Vadum, had done everything he could to keep his mind occupied. He double-checked his pilot’s glide path toward a line of

craggy peaks on the wintry edge of the northern hemisphere. He ordered scans of the storm that was brewing there, even though he knew the Phantom was rated to withstand far worse hazards. Having exhausted these by-the-book operations and not wanting to become a nuisance to his crew, the Half-Jaw busied himself by watching the storm grow larger in the Phantom's viewscreens.

For a handful of heartbeats, as the craft nosed into the bright tops of the stratus clouds, the Half-Jaw felt a surge of confidence. *You are Sangheili! Born and bred for war. This is what you live for!* But then the Phantom broke into the dull gray light beneath the clouds, and his false bravado shattered.

The first evidence of the assault was Rahnelo's ruined spaceport. Through the snow whipping past the Phantom's swept-back nose, the Half-Jaw saw launchpads raked by plasma cannons and a hulking orbital transport burst open from the inside, its fuel tanks boiled by sustained laser fire. The port's smaller craft were slagged inside their hangars, likely before their pilots even had their engines spinning. It was a precise, thorough attack, clearly the work of an experienced foe. But the Half-Jaw knew this was just the beginning.

The broad road from the spaceport to Rahnelo's largest settlement was cratered by heavy plasma bombardment. Deep pits walked up the frozen flagstones, and near misses had vaporized the ice fields on either side, creating holes of blackened tundra. The craters continued into the settlement, where direct hits had destroyed many of the high-walled family compounds, littering the ground with slate roof tiles, iron structural spars, and foundation stones that had stood for generations.

For the Half-Jaw, it felt as though he was trapped with his eye against some sort of macabre microscope. As the Phantom descended, layers of magnification clicked into place, each one revealing horrific new details. The final lens belonged to the corpses; stark, dark lumps scattered in the snowy streets leading up to the settlement's keep.

Having been a warrior most of his life, Rtas 'Vadum thought he had seen the aftermath of war in all its grim variations. During the Covenant's long campaign against the humans, he had witnessed the destruction of many of their cities. On rare occasions, he had seen

Covenant fleets unleash their might on entire human worlds, bathing their planets in plasma fire until they shone like glass. And most recently, Rtas had witnessed High Charity itself fall to the devastating parasite known as the Flood.

But until this moment, the Half-Jaw had never seen the annihilation of a Sangheili world. He had always feared the humans might someday deal a blow like this. But he never imagined he would see one of his species' settlements savaged by creatures who used to call themselves Covenant.

As his Phantom flared for landing, the Half-Jaw felt unusually heavy inside the silver armor that covered him from head to toe. Rahnelo's gravity was slightly less than that of the Sangheili homeworld, Sanghelios. But the Half-Jaw's legs were leaden as he marched down the Phantom's ramp and into the icy intersection of two wide cobblestone streets. He forced himself to strike a confident pose, his flanged, white-striped helmet held high and his shoulders set against the frigid wind. He hoped the dozen Sangheili warriors forming a perimeter around him wouldn't see any difference in his demeanor—wouldn't guess the truth that the Half-Jaw had known for some time but didn't dare admit to anyone, least of all himself:

I am tired. And I don't want to fight anymore.

"Cowardice!" The word momentarily stunned the Half-Jaw. But then he realized the Blademaster wasn't speaking to him. The gold-armored Sangheili stood in the middle of the intersection near an overturned sledge, his fists balled on his hips beside his two inactive energy blades. Years of shouting orders had accustomed Vul 'Soran to speaking at maximum volume regardless of the situation. And now, even though the elderly warrior's voice was hoarse and cracked, his words easily carried over the Phantom's idling hum: "Only the accursed Jiralhanae would attack a world with no defenses!"

The Half-Jaw strode to the Blademaster, snow squealing beneath his armored feet, and appraised the scene around the sledge. A *du'nak* lay dead, tangled in its lines. The woolly, two-trunked draft animal had pulled the slat-wood sledge into a sharp turn that bent its bronze runners and left it balanced precariously on one side. Spilled baskets of mustard-colored grain lay in a jumbled pile beside the sledge.

Nearby were two Jiralhanae corpses: one facedown, the other on its back. The latter figure was headless, and the missing part lay a few meters away, upright in the snow, staring back at its body with a tight-lipped grimace of profound disappointment.

"Not entirely defenseless . . ." the Half-Jaw said, staring at the bodies. He knelt beside the facedown corpse. "Help me move this mess."

The Jiralhanae were both clad in dark blue, heavy-plate armor. Their shaggy limbs were blood-stiff, frozen at awkward angles. When, after considerable effort, the Half-Jaw and Blademaster finally rolled the corpse onto its back, they discovered the body of a male Sangheili who had been crushed beneath it in the snow.

The dead Sangheili was even older than the Blademaster, probably in his ninth decade. His open eyes were clouded, and his deeply tanned skin was stretched tight across his cheeks. The elder wore no armor, just a long, thick cloak spun from *du'nak* wool, mottled gray and white, likely shorn from the same animal lying dead beside him. The wool had done little to stop what the Half-Jaw recognized were wounds from Jiralhanae plasma rifles; deep, charred pits in the elder's chest. But the old Sangheili still held the hilt of an energy blade in one fist. And although the weapon's patina indicated it was even older than its owner, the blade, expertly wielded, had been more than enough to stop his much larger foes.

"He tangled his *du'nak*. Flipped his sledge," the Blademaster said.

The Half-Jaw nodded in agreement. "Made himself some cover, then fought a last stand."

Now that the second Jiralhanae was on its back, the Half-Jaw could see the wounds from the elder's energy blade: two crosscut slashes in the armor that wrapped the Jiralhanae's belly. The metal around the cuts was heated to a rainbow sheen, but there was no blood or spill of viscera such as the Half-Jaw had seen when human soldiers had gotten lucky with their primitive combat knives. The elder's energy blade had instantly cauterized the flesh it cut. The wounds it made were so clean that they almost looked painless . . . but the Half-Jaw knew from personal experience that this was not true.

As with all Sangheili, the Half-Jaw's mouth was split vertically and

horizontally into four separate mandibles. But the hinged jawbones on the left side of his face were cut almost clean away, the result of his own close call with the energy blade of another Sangheili whose mind had been possessed by the Flood. This was before the parasite's infestation of High Charity, and even though the wound was almost a year old, it still stung, especially when the Half-Jaw spoke. To avoid the pain, he moved his mouth as little as possible, and as a result his voice was a near-constant growl.

"They came right for him," the Half-Jaw said. "Bunched up and eager for the kill."

The Blademaster huffed dismissively at the Jiralhanae. "Fools should have taken their time. Split up, circled 'round." Then he gave the dead elder a respectful nod. "I hope I'm still that good when I'm that old."

You are *that old*, the Half-Jaw almost said. But the jest was as tired as he was, and he let the Blademaster build to his bluster.

"When I find the Jiralhanae chieftain who led this attack," Vul 'Soran shouted, his breath steaming in the cold, "by the blood of my father, by the blood of my sons, I swear he will learn what my blades can do!"

The Blademaster was Sangheili-ai, a master swordsman. He had been a fleet champion in his prime, and even as he made the slow slide through middle age, he still humbled younger opponents looking to burnish their reputations with his defeat. But the Blademaster was already in his sixties when the Covenant started fighting the humans, and that long campaign had sapped his strength. Now Vul 'Soran's deep blue skin was splotched gray, and even the gilded armor that denoted his master rank had lost its luster. Indeed, the armor was covered with so many dents and abrasions that the Half-Jaw frequently worried about its integrity and had even considered ordering Vul 'Soran to commission a new set.

But a Sangheili's armor was his honor, a public record of glorious victories and narrow escapes. Every battle-born imperfection was a mark in the tally of his esteem. And few things short of death could pry him out of it.

The Half-Jaw knew from their recent sparring matches that Vul

‘Soran’s technique with dual energy blades remained flawless. But his second-in-command wasn’t as quick as he used to be and he tired easily. Would the Blademaster have slaughtered these two Jiralhanae? Yes. But could he defeat one of their mighty chieftains in single combat? The Half-Jaw’s ruined jaws twitched with sudden pain. *Forgive me, old friend. But those days are long behind you. . . .*

“*Shipmaster, movement to the north*.” The voice crackled in the Half-Jaw’s helmet. He glanced at a second Phantom orbiting overhead, its purple hull easy to spot, even in the whirling snow. “*Scans read friendly*,” the Phantom’s pilot clarified, and the Blademaster shouted for the perimeter guards to make way. Soon another sledge glided into view, pulled by a single *du’nak* with yellowed horns that spiraled backward in an illusion of speed, mocking the animal’s deliberate pace.

A Sangheili youth sat on the sledge’s elevated seat, bundled in a glossy black *du’nak* cloak many sizes too big for its frame. A second Sangheili in a similarly colored cloak and hood strode beside the sledge, holding the *du’nak*’s bridle in one hand and a double-bladed energy lance in the other. One of the lance’s elongated, diamond-shaped blades glowed cyan hot, lighting a path for the draft animal through the snow. As the sledge neared the Half-Jaw, the Sangheili with the lance gave the bridle a gentle tug and the *du’nak* lumbered to a stop, venting clouds of steam through its trunks. The animal was exhausted; spit hung in icicles from its whiskered jowls, and its muscular back legs trembled.

“I am the shipmaster of the carrier *Shadow of Intent*,” the Half-Jaw said. “We received a call for help and—” But before he could finish, the Sangheili with the lance strode between him and the Blademaster, heading straight for the overturned sledge. The newcomer knelt beside the dead elder, lance planted in the snow. For a long time, the only sound was the crackle of the lance’s blade, flash-vaporizing any flakes that blew too close.

“The attack on us was days ago,” the Sangheili finally said. The voice was muffled by the hood—but it was unmistakably female. The Half-Jaw saw her shoulders slump inside her cloak. The weariness he recognized. The anger he didn’t see until she stood, wheeled on him,

and snapped in the sharp, clipped cadence of Rahnelo's Sangheili dialect: "Now what help can you give?"

The Blademaster bristled. "That is no way to address a shipmaster —"

But the Half-Jaw silenced the Blademaster with an upraised hand. "I am truly sorry," he said. "We came as quickly as we could."

The female Sangheili threw back her hood. She wore a round-nosed, backswept battle helmet, deep red with delicate gold scrollwork that flashed as bright as her amber eyes. She started to speak, then clenched her jaws tight, which said everything the Half-Jaw needed to know about how fast she thought he *should* have come.

The young Sangheili meanwhile leaped from the sledge and trudged through the snow to the elder's corpse, dragging the tails of his coat behind him. "Who is it, sister?"

"The miller, Gol 'Rham-*ee*." The female Sangheili emphasized the honorific at the end of the elder's name, making sure the Half-Jaw and Blademaster knew that he had once been a Covenant warrior, not just a grinder of grain.

"They killed his *du'nak*, too?" The boy's voice cracked between a snarl and a sob. He gave the nearest Jiralhanae a ferocious kick. "I hate them all!" The Jiralhanae's body barely moved.

"What's done is done and cannot be undone," the female said. Then, softening her tone: "Come, let's take the miller to the keep."

The sister and brother reached for the elder's body, and when the Half-Jaw and Blademaster realized what the siblings were doing, they helped them heft it onto the sledge, where more Sangheili corpses had been placed under layers of wool blankets. It was hard to tell how many bodies there were. All were horribly blistered and burned; some were fused together, locked in a final, protective embrace.

"We found them near the craters, on the road to the port," the youth explained. "They were running for the keep. But the Jiralhanae ship cut them down."

"What kind of ship?" The Blademaster took an impatient step toward the youth. "Are you certain there was only one?"

The young Sangheili stood his ground, but his eyes went wide with fear. The female put a protective hand across her brother's chest and

shot the Blademaster a withering glance. “All questions come to me,” she said.

This rebuff set the Blademaster’s blood boiling. But it was clear to the Half-Jaw that both brother and sister were still raw from the attack, and the last thing they needed was more demands, however well intentioned, on their already frayed nerves.

“Blademaster, rally the squad,” the Half-Jaw said. Then to the female Sangheili: “We would like to accompany you to the keep and speak with your kaidon.”

The female Sangheili said neither yes nor no. Instead, without a word, she helped her brother climb back aboard the sledge, tugged the *du’nak* around by its bridle, and then fell into step beside the animal as it plodded back the way it had come, pulling the sledge through its own deep ruts. The Half-Jaw, Blademaster, and their dozen warriors followed, and soon all were tramping through the deepening snow up a gently sloping road past more ruined compounds, the Blademaster barking reminders to check every Jiralhanae corpse they passed. The Half-Jaw and female Sangheili walked together, on either side of the *du’nak*, heads bowed against an icy wind.

After many silent steps, the Half-Jaw said: “You wear the armor of a warrior.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“No. What else would the daughter of a kaidon be?”

The female flicked her eyes at the Half-Jaw; a glance of respect for an educated guess. On Sanghelios, tradition held that children grew up without knowing their fathers. Instead, they were raised by their uncles and aunts—a system designed to emphasize clan rather than parental loyalty. On colonies such as Rahnelo, where populations were smaller and families tighter knit, the Half-Jaw knew the rules were different.

“I am Tul ‘Juran,” the female said, “first and only daughter of Kaidon Tulum ‘Juranai, captain of his guard and scion of his keep.”

“Rtas ‘Vadum.” The Half-Jaw fumbled the *V* at the beginning of his surname, which was especially hard to say with missing jaws. Embarrassed, he continued in a deeper growl: “I would speak with your father—ask the kaidon all he knows about the attack, so I can

punish those responsible."

"You can speak to the kaidon," the Scion said, "but not to my father."

"I don't understand."

"The kaidon . . . rides behind you."

Had the Half-Jaw been less fatigued, his mind less focused on maintaining the outward appearance of calm authority, he would have immediately understood. But it took him a few more steps, crunching through the snow, to work out the answer. *One of the corpses on the sledge . . . ? No . . . the kaidon is her* brother. Which was, at first, difficult to believe.

Kaidons were mature masters of their keeps, rulers of entire provinces. The youth on the sledge was less than a decade old. Pale, protective scales still hung from his neck, an evolutionary holdover from the days when Sangheili parents used to carry their offspring in their toothy jaws to keep them safe from predators as they hunted and gathered across Sanghelios's coastal plains.

"Most of my brothers died in the war," Tul 'Juran continued. Rahnelo, like most Sangheili colony worlds, had seen heavy recruitment during the Covenant's long fight against humanity. "The two who remained joined my father in his final charge against the Jiralhanae. That was three days ago. We haven't seen any of them since."

Which meant the youth on the sledge was the last of the kaidon's sons. Although the Scion was older, well into her second decade, she was female. And according to Sangheili tradition, no female could ever be kaidon. Mistress of her keep, ruler of her kaidon husband, yes. But never owner and heir to her father's lands and other possessions.

If the Scion's youngest brother had also died or gone missing in the Jiralhanae assault, Rahnelo's lesser kaidons would soon be vying for the Scion's inheritance, attempting to secure her hand in marriage, either to themselves or to one of their own sons. If the Scion refused, she could fight, and the annals of Sangheili history were filled with brave and steadfast kaidon daughters who did exactly that. Some held out for years. A few, such as the Gray Maiden of Konar, had lived out their lives in perpetual siege, fortified in their keeps, aided by loyal

vassals and the foolishness of rival kaidon suitors who wasted decades fighting among themselves.

As the Scion strode through the snow, the Half-Jaw caught glimpses of her armored torso and legs as they split her cloak. The red metal bands were spattered with Jiralhanae blood, and the Half-Jaw knew in an instant that she would defend her honor and her keep just as fiercely against any male Sangheili challengers.

"I've been counting corpses," the Half-Jaw said. "You fought off at least two companies of Jiralhanae as well as their ship—"

"A light cruiser," the Scion interjected. "It bombed the port and bastion compounds, then it dropped its infantry. . . ." She lowered her voice so her brother wouldn't hear. "The Jiralhanae swarmed the streets, killing any Sangheili who stood their ground. We sallied out from the keep to save those we could. When the Jiralhanae drew close, we held the gates. But soon there were no more stragglers, and my father ordered me inside—up to the walls to direct the guards' fire. Then the kaidon charged, my two brothers at his side, straight for the Jiralhanae's leader." The Scion took a deep breath, then swallowed anger and frustration. "We had their leader in our sights, but he moved too quickly—faster than anything I've ever seen. And then . . . he was gone."

The Blademaster had marched up to join the Half-Jaw during the Scion's tale and now said: "I've never heard of a Jiralhanae chieftain who could move like that. How large was his hammer?"

The Scion spat her words like bitter fruit. "Their leader was San'Shyuum."

The Half-Jaw and Blademaster shared a surprised glance, and then listened, rapt, as Tul 'Juran described what she had seen.

A San'Shyuum without a throne. A warrior in black armor who had evaded her keep's finest marksman and disappeared into the smoke of the burning settlement. An enemy that could have reignited its cruiser's plasma cannons and vaporized the keep but instead had pulled its ship from orbit and disappeared almost as quickly as it came.

"A Prelate," growled the Half-Jaw.

"It can't be," the Blademaster said. "They all died at High Charity."

“Evidently not.”

The *du’nak* bellowed with relief as the street finally crested and the keep appeared through the driving snow: a fortress with soaring walls of rough-hewn granite built between two mountain spurs—the farthest fingers of a line of jagged, snowcapped peaks. The keep’s iron gates were open, and small groups of Sangheili settlers and keep guards were gathered outside the walls, near the smoldering remains of a large funeral pyre. With all these eyes upon them, the Half-Jaw and his warriors unloaded the corpses from the sledge. Everyone waited in silence for the bodies to catch fire on the warm heap of ash and bone. The oily smoke rose, twisting in the wind, and the pyre consumed the last of its sorry fuel.

“Where are you going?” the Half-Jaw asked the siblings as they turned their tired *du’nak* back onto the road.

“To find my father and my brothers,” the young kaidon said. “To bring them to the fire.”

“If you haven’t found them by now, you never will,” the Half-Jaw said, as kindly as he could. “At least, not here.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tul ‘Juran.

“If a Prelate came here just to kill, this keep would be a pit in the ground.”

This observation pricked the pride of the keep guards in the crowd, who grumbled among themselves. But the Scion’s eyes grew wide with a hope she hadn’t dared to consider. “If this . . . Prelate spared the keep. If he let *us* live . . .”

“. . . He might have taken prisoners,” the Half-Jaw said.

The Blademaster locked his arms across his chest. “And why, by the balls on every blasted Prophet’s chin, would he have done that?”

Which was a very good question. But the Half-Jaw had no answer.

Tul ‘Juran tossed back her cloak, baring her armored chest, and spoke loud enough for all to hear. “I invoke my right, as Scion of this keep, to free my kaidon from his imprisonment and take revenge upon his captors!” She stepped to the Half-Jaw and bowed her head. “For this, I humbly beg passage on your ship and enlistment in your crew.”

The Half-Jaw heard nothing humble in the Scion’s voice, however. Her words were steel determination, and the right she had invoked

was ages old and just as rigid. . . .

The entire recorded history of Sanghelios could accurately be described as one long war for control of its thousands of familial keeps. Even after the Sangheili built interstellar spaceships and found other foes, kaidons still fought bitterly, and in these skirmishes, one kaidon sometimes captured another—a terrible fate, not just for a kaidon, but for all Sangheili warriors who believed that being stripped of armor and denied a noble death in battle was the ultimate humiliation. A kaidon's captor never intended to release his prisoner. Instead, the vanquished would languish in their cells, a mockery to themselves and all their kin—unless one of their bloodline invoked the "right of release" and was then bold and clever enough to see it through.

These liberations were the stuff of legends. But the most famous, and the one the Half-Jaw knew best, was the ballad of Kel 'Darsam, First Light of Sanghelios.

Kel 'Darsam was a warrior renowned for his bravery and cunning. In the earliest eras of Sangheili history, before the first Forerunner relics were discovered and these new gods conquered the old, Kel was a beloved member of the Sangheili pantheon—a demigod born to a mortal mother and a divine father who was none other than Urs himself, lord of all other Sangheili gods and namesake of the largest and most sacred of Sanghelios's three suns.

In the days when Urs ruled Sangheili spiritual life, the seas that covered much of their home world were still vast and mysterious and filled with monstrous, semi-mythical creatures. Kel 'Darsam was famous for slaying many of these: the Sand Dwellers of Il'ik; the many-mouthed Watcher of the Lonely Harbor; the nine serpents of Dur'at'dur, whose endless thrashing was thought to cause those islands' deadly currents. Indeed, Kel was so keen on ridding the seas of their terrors that he had little interest in becoming kaidon, a position he gladly left to his uncle and mentor, Orok 'Darsam.

During one of many wars to defend his keep, Orok was captured by a powerful sea lord and rival kaidon, Nesh 'Radoon, and Kel dutifully invoked the right of release. Without a navy of his own, Kel was forced to sail alone, under cover of night and through a line of squalls,

to the sheer walls of his rival's keep. After scaling the walls and slaying the keep's best swordsmen, Kel and Orok raced to make their escape. But as Kel perched on the wall, preparing to dive to safety, a spear struck him in the back. Mortally wounded, Kel tumbled to the waves far below.

Oddly, the Half-Jaw knew, there were two versions of the ballad: one in which Nesh 'Radoon threw the spear that killed Kel 'Darsam, and another in which the spear was instead thrown by his uncle, Orok. In the latter version, the entire capture was a ruse—a trap designed by Orok, who was deeply fearful that Kel would someday tire of slaughtering monsters and decide to claim the title of kaidon for his own.

But both versions of the legend had the same ending.

As Kel 'Darsam fell, dying, toward the waves, he was touched by the first rays of Urs as the god-star rose over the edge of the sea. In this moment, Kel was transformed into pure light; an eternal reflection of his divine father's pride and grief.

After the founding of the Covenant, many of the old myths faded away. But the Sangheili continued to sing the ballad of Kel 'Darsam to their sons and daughters, just as they taught them that the Sangheili word *kel* means "light (that dances on the waves)."

"Ridiculous!" the Blademaster said, glowering at the Scion. "I've never heard of a female invoking the right of release. And I know for certain that no female has ever been—or ever will be—a warrior on a ship!"

The Scion glared right back at the Blademaster. "That is not your decision."

She was right, the Half-Jaw knew. As shipmaster, it was *his* decision. And, looking at the Scion's determined eyes, he was surprised to realize he had already made it.

"You can't be serious!" the Blademaster sputtered after the Half-Jaw had approved the Scion's enlistment and pulled his second-in-command aside for a private conference. "This is unprecedented—a breach of the most fundamental rules of recruitment! And more than that, it's an affront to honor and tradition!"

As Vul 'Soran continued his impassioned protest, the second

Phantom landed and deployed its troops: two squads of silver-armored Sangheili rangers—and one Unggoy. This stout, bandy-legged creature was also clad in ranger silver, but unlike his Sangheili comrades, he wore a cylindrical tank across his shoulders and a breathing mask on his face. The Unggoy was unusually tall for his species, and the spiny top of his crustaceous head nearly reached the shoulders of the Sangheili. Typically, Unggoy were the subservient, lesser members of a Covenant military unit. But when this Grunt gave a curt hand signal, the Sangheili rangers formed ranks and stood at attention. For he was the rangers' leader, and they obeyed him without question.

"I'm sorry you feel otherwise, but she is coming with us," the Half-Jaw said to the Blademaster. "That's my final decision." Then, directing Vul's gaze to the Unggoy ranger, Rtas noted in a softer tone, "Besides, if you can get used to *that*, you can get used to anything."

The Half-Jaw and his troops stayed long enough to help the Rahnelo settlers drag the Jiralhanae corpses from their streets, pile them into the large craters on the road to the spaceport, and then bury them with rubble. This solution came at the suggestion of the Scion's brother. The settlers would not dignify the Jiralhanae with a funeral pyre, but were content, in the years to come, to let their *du'nak* trample their attackers' graves as they hauled their loads to and from the port. It was a wise first decision for the young kaidon, the Half-Jaw thought, and although he was undoubtedly bereft, the Scion's brother stood strong as his sibling departed the keep, taking only her armor and her lance and leaving a promise to return.

By then the storm had passed, and when the two Phantoms rocketed skyward, *Shadow of Intent* was bright above them, its long, hooked prow glinting in Rahnelo's reflected light. From the bottom, the mighty assault-carrier looked like two iridescent blue teardrops, one larger than the other, joined at their tapered tails. The ship was a little more than five kilometers long and nearly two kilometers wide in the thickest part of its aft section, which housed the reactors for its maneuvering engines and slipspace drive. Heavily armored and

bristling with plasma cannons, *Shadow of Intent* looked invulnerable. But only from afar.

On approach to the primary hangar, the Half-Jaw could see all the damage the venerable carrier had endured: dull spots in its shimmering metal skin where human missiles' thermonuclear detonations had burned through the carrier's energy shields and seared its hull; blackened gaps in rows of point-defense laser batteries where their former enemy's Longsword fighters had gotten lucky shots; hastily patched penetrations from MAC rounds, the hypersonic magnetically accelerated slugs that were the humans' most powerful naval weapons.

On top of all this damage were scars from *Shadow of Intent*'s attempt to blockade High Charity. There the carrier had traded plasma torpedoes with San'Shyuum vessels desperate to flee the Flood, and a particularly close call had left a bubbled streak on the starboard side of the carrier's prow.

Shadow of Intent looked as tired as the Half-Jaw felt. And a few months ago, when the Arbiter, Thel 'Vadam, had offered him the mission to take the carrier far away from Sanghelios, Rtas had gladly accepted.

When the Covenant shattered, not all Sangheili had abandoned the idea of Forerunner divinity. After the fall of High Charity and the cessation of hostilities against the humans, tensions had flared between those Sangheili who still revered the Forerunners and the Arbiter's faction, which did not.

The Arbiter and the Half-Jaw had been rivals for a time, after the failure to keep the humans from destroying Halo was laid at the Arbiter's feet. But during the Schism, when the Prophets removed the Sangheili from command positions in the Covenant military and replaced them with the Jiralhanae, the two had forged a tight bond in the sudden fight against their common foes. The Arbiter was now the widely accepted leader of the Sangheili, but as the threat of Sangheili civil war increased, the Arbiter had asked Rtas 'Vadum to pilot *Shadow of Intent* away from Sanghelios. The assault carrier was presently the last operational ship of its type in the Sangheili fleet—a hugely powerful vessel that the Arbiter wanted out of reach of other

shipmasters whose loyalties weren't as certain.

So the Half-Jaw had gathered his crew and charted a course for the sparsely populated frontier of the former Covenant Empire. It was here, not far from Rahnelo, that the Half-Jaw had hoped he and his warriors could finally rest and recuperate. The Half-Jaw sighed. *It was good while it lasted. . . .*

Shadow of Intent's hangar had room for scores of Phantom dropships and Seraph fighters. But now the Half-Jaw's two Phantoms had the cavernous space all to themselves. Most of the missing craft were casualties of war. The others Rtas had abandoned; he simply didn't have the crew to man them. Indeed, there were fewer than two hundred Sangheili on *Shadow of Intent*, a small fraction of the carrier's capacity, just enough to keep the ship's most important systems running. *But enough to win a fight against a Prelate?*

The Blademaster had given his own answer to this question during their flight back to the carrier: *Shadow of Intent* would have the upper hand against a single cruiser, even with its reduced crew; this Prelate was clearly dangerous, but hitting an essentially defenseless colony wasn't the same as naval combat; they had the advantage in both weapon strength and tonnage. It was a reasoned response. But the Half-Jaw wanted a second opinion, and so after the Phantoms landed, he sought out the Unggoy.

Near the aft wall of the hangar was a line of floor-mounted methane-recharge stations. These clusters of tanks and hoses were designed to service dozens of Unggoy, but Stolt was alone. In fact, he was the only Unggoy—and the only non-Sangheili—in the Half-Jaw's crew.

But if Stolt was lonely for his own kind, he never showed it. The Unggoy seemed as relaxed as always, his back resting against the recharge station, his hard-shelled arms hanging loosely at his sides. Like the rest of his body, Stolt's thick forearms were dotted with stubby spines, evidence of his species' crustacean ancestry. The ranger leader's small, dark eyes betrayed no emotion as he listened to Rtas explain their new mission. And when his shipmaster was done speaking, the Unggoy simply scratched the seal of his mask with a barnacled finger and stared appraisingly at the Scion.

The female Sangheili had disembarked from her Phantom and was standing in a line with the other male Sangheili warriors, her red armor standing out against their silver. Holding her lance at her side, Tul ‘Juran pointedly ignored their curious glances and muttered assessments and was the first to comply when the Blademaster shouted for them all to shut their jaws and come to attention.

The Half-Jaw knew that Stolt had faced similar scrutiny when he had joined *Shadow of Intent*’s complement of rangers during the human war. Rangers were an elite force, trained in the demanding art of zero-gee combat. The humans had called them “ship killers,” and for good reason: many human vessels had perished when Covenant rangers breached their hulls and tore them apart from the inside out. Unggoy rangers weren’t unheard of, but they were rare. And at first, most Sangheili on *Shadow of Intent* had regarded this Unggoy as a Grunt who would never be their equal.

They were wrong.

Stolt had survived encounters with human soldiers that saw many of his comrades fall. When he wasn’t battling the enemy, he outfought any Sangheili who sparred against him, enduring their melee strikes until they tired, and then pummeling them into submission with his chitinous fists and feet. After a chance encounter with one of the humans’ fearsome Spartans, in which the Unggoy wounded the enhanced human so grievously that it was forced to withdraw, even the Blademaster approved Stolt’s promotion to ranger leader.

“So then,” the Half-Jaw said after the Unggoy’s tank was full and he had pulled away from the station with a wet pop and hiss, “do you believe we can kill a Prelate?”

Stolt kept his beady eyes on the Scion as he savored a long breath from his tank. “I think,” he said, his gravelly voice rumbling through his mask, “we’ll need all the help we can get.”

In the Prelate’s dreams, his return to High Charity was always the same.

The holy city’s simulated star had dimmed, giving the dome’s

floating towers a warm, sunset glow. Barges draped with colored streamers and fragrant flowers filled the air, except for the space around the bone-white Forerunner Dreadnought at the center of the dome. Here there were fireworks; explosions of celebratory glyphs that formed phrases such as: A CHILD FOR THE AGES! or BLESSED WITH TWINS! or SHE HAS HER MOTHER'S NOSE (THANK THE GODS!). Some of these were fiery proclamations about individual San'Shyuum's reproductive potency that, despite their artful innuendo, sorely tested the Committee of Concordance's laws on public decency.

But on this night, all was permitted. San'Shyuum children were rare, and when the birthing season reached its peak, all of High Charity rejoiced. Even the dour Sangheili joined in the festivities. Above the Dreadnought and below the star, Sangheili Banshee fighter craft flew aerobatics in tight formation. Watching from the barges or temporary grandstands cantilevered out from their towers, tipsy San'Shyuum revelers would roar their approval and pound their fists against their anti-grav thrones whenever the pilots demonstrated particular daring.

This picture of High Charity at its finest—bright and bawdy and hopeful—spread out above the Prelate as he exited the stalk and flew up into the dome.

Viewed from the outside, High Charity looked like a mushroom that, hidden in the deep black night of interstellar space, had grown to shocking size. The cap that formed the city's dome was hundreds of kilometers in diameter. The stalk was longer than the dome was wide and bristled with dry docks and manufacturies that served fleets of capital ships and countless smaller vessels. Novice shipmasters were often daunted by the arcane procedures and quasi-religious communication protocols that governed flight operations in and around the holy city. But Tem'Bhetek had logged plenty of approaches, and after many months away from home, he was quick to dock his cruiser in its bay and disembark the moment the gantries latched.

Like most of his voyages, this last one had been wrapped in secrecy, and communications to and from his cruiser had been tightly constrained. But his wife had gotten one message through: *We two are*

now three. And every day away from High Charity after that had seemed like an eternity.

The Prelate had instantly understood her cryptic message's meaning. He was desperate to see his newborn child, as any first-time parent would be. But Tem's urgency was amplified by the fact that he had never thought he would be a father.

San'Shyuum society was incredibly strict about which genes passed from one generation to the next, and the Prelate's bloodline had fallen out of favor ages ago due to overbreeding. He was officially listed on the Roll of Celibates, and once designated as such, it was impossible to be removed . . . or so the Prelate thought. After he had been selected to enter the Sacred Promissory—after the Minister of Preparation had used the Promissory's Forerunner machines to alter his genes and enhance his mind and body—the Prelate was able to petition for his removal from the Roll and was matched with a suitable female: Yalar'Otan'Elat. And she was more than he had ever hoped for.

Yalar was beautiful, long-necked, and delicately limbed. While her family members were wealthy owners of mining concerns on a handful of Covenant worlds, Yalar was noble and humble in equal measure—a rarity in San'Shyuum high society, which was rife with snobbery and striving. Tem fell instantly in love with her clever tongue and guarded smile. But over time, what devoted him body and soul was that Yalar accepted the three things that he could never be: home more often than he was away; honest about his ongoing service to the Minister; and confident that the experimental alterations to his genes wouldn't somehow ruin their chances for a healthy child.

Yalar accepted all of these conditions. But she was anything but demure.

When her pregnancy was confirmed, Yalar had refused confinement, a precaution embraced by most expectant San'Shyuum mothers. Instead, long after her belly began to swell, Yalar continued her work in High Charity's lower districts, ensuring the Unggoy, Kig-Yar, and other "lesser" species (a categorization she rejected) had all the resources and services they were owed as loyal members of the Covenant. She was an irrepressible champion of the alliance's ideals, and the Prelate knew their child would thrive even if it inherited just

a small part of its mother's spirit.

As the Prelate soared higher into the dome, so did his anticipation. After years of secrecy and sacrifice, he was about to reap the only rewards he had ever wanted: a child, a family. He maxed power to his anti-grav belt and sped toward a future that was as bright as the fireworks bursting above him. . . .

And then the nightmare began, like it always did, with a sphere of shimmering light that appeared near the apex of the dome.

The sphere remained stable for long as it took High Charity's citizens to look up from their revels and draw a collective breath. Then the slipspace portal imploded with a thunderous crack louder than any firework. It rang High Charity like a bell, jerked the Prelate from his flight of fancy, and reminded him of the real reason for his haste:

Tonight does not have to be the same. Tonight I can save *them!*

Out of the collapsing portal a ship emerged that the Prelate instantly recognized as a human frigate. The lightly armored vessel was essentially a MAC cannon sandwiched between two engine pods. What frigates lacked in defensive capability, however, they made up for in speed and agility. So even though it emerged from slipspace at high velocity, the frigate was able to pull up hard and bank to avoid the wall of the dome. Then, in a cacophony of crumbling stone and wrenching metal, the ship buried itself up to its engines in one of the floating towers. It hung there, shuddering and burning, like a flaming arrow plunged into the heart of the Covenant.

In the stunned silence that followed, the Prelate wanted to scream: *Go, you fools! Flee the city! While there's still time!* But in this nightmare his voice failed him, as it always did, and he watched in mute horror as the ruined vessel unleashed its horrible cargo.

A thick cloud of Flood spores spewed through the rents in the frigate's hull, flowed around the damaged tower, and quickly spread to the two adjacent spires, swallowing them whole. The ship's engines sputtered inside the miasmic cloud, giving it a dim and dreadful pulse —a semblance of life that turned the Prelate's blood cold.

Suddenly the city snapped out of its stupor. Celebrations ended in a rolling panic as the Flood cloud spread both ways around the dome.

San'Shyuum abandoned their towers, crowded onto barges, or simply flung themselves toward the stalk and its waiting ships, trusting their anti-grav thrones and belts to break their fall. Many who moved too slowly disappeared into the spores. The Sangheili Banshees broke formation and began strafing the Flood cloud, but their firepower was woefully inadequate, and soon the Prelate found himself fighting upward against a tide of screaming, wild-eyed evacuees.

The tower Yalar had picked for them was old; a black marble obelisk with crenellated balconies that was one of the first carved from the mammoth hunk of the San'Shyuum homeworld that served as the dome's foundation. In a habitat where the status of one's living quarters was determined by three criteria—size, altitude, and proximity to the Forerunner Dreadnought—their cramped, low-slung tower near the wall of the dome was decidedly low-class. But while they could have lived somewhere better, Yalar wanted to be near to her work in the lower districts, and they both soon realized there were advantages to close quarters. The tower's tight hallways and narrow gravity lifts gave them license to press close together in full view of their neighbors, touch and whisper and begin the tender intimacies of their reunions before they reached the privacy of their chambers.

But now the Prelate cursed their tower's claustrophobic conditions as he was forced to lean power to his anti-grav belt and decelerate into its low-ceilinged entry hall. His feet grazed the hall's polished stone floor as he swung to avoid a trio of San'Shyuum in their thrones, so laden down with personal possessions that they didn't see him coming. Having avoided this collision, he angled up a ramp to the gravity lifts, chose a tube that served his apartment, and boosted into its shimmering field. Ten, twenty floors went by in a blur. But then the whole tower shuddered, slamming the Prelate against the tube's glassy walls. Sliding and tumbling upward, he almost missed his apartment, but managed a wild thrust with his arms, caught a railing, and levered himself into the entry passage.

"Yalar!" the Prelate shouted as he palmed the lock on the apartment's door and shouldered through before it split fully open. "Yalar, I'm here!" He cut power to his belt, landed hard on his feet, and sprinted across the bare floor of their common room, hurdling a

low wooden table, and then knifed through a curtain strung with garnet beads into the triangular hall that led to their sleeping chamber. A few steps into the hall, and the tower shook again—more violently this time. Motes of lavender light burning in alcoves that ran the length of the hall sputtered out, and suddenly the Prelate was in total darkness.

This was the moment in his nightmare when Tem'Bhetek became fully aware he was dreaming. All that came before—the fireworks, the frigate, the Flood—these were inevitable. But now, with the tower trembling around him, Tem was conscious of his ability to alter what came next. He held his breath and listened . . . and heard a mewling in the dark.

The Prelate stepped toward the muffled cries, hands groping along the walls. As he entered the sleeping chamber, he stopped and let his vision adjust to a wan light seeping through the curtains drawn across the balcony window. Slowly the shape of his wife resolved, sitting in the middle of their padded sleeping pallet. Yalar was draped in a diaphanous pale yellow nursing gown. Their child was cradled in her arms, swaddled in a copper blanket. As the babe redoubled its wail, Yalar began to sing:

This path, where does it lead?
Take my hand, walk with me.
Into the light, forever free?
Take my hand, walk with me . . .

It was an old San'Shyuum lullaby, and as Yalar hummed its sweet melody, the Prelate's mind raced with all the things he'd said before—all the ways he'd tried in previous dreams to get his wife to leave their bedchamber before it was too late. But as always, the nightmare didn't wait. And before he'd landed on something new to say, Yalar stopped singing, raised her large, long-lashed eyes, and said:

"We waited for you."

"I . . . I was close." The Prelate's voice was ragged. "Just outside the city."

Yalar lowered her gaze to the child crying in her arms. "But you weren't *here*."

The Prelate felt a change in the air; something old and patient and powerful stretching out from the deepest shadows of the room. “Please, my love.” He stepped forward, hands outstretched. “Come with me. Now.”

But Yalar shrank back into the folds of her gown and began to sing again:

This path, where does it lead . . . ?

A single Flood spore wafted past the Prelate. It took all his strength not to reach out and crush its ragged spines, its ugly, pulsing core. He had tried once before, but fighting back had only accelerated what was to come.

“We can leave this place,” Tem said. “You and me and . . .” He looked blankly at the child. *We two are now three*, Yalar had said in her message. But she had told him nothing else—not revealed the gender of their child.

“Our son? Our daughter?” Yalar said. “I wanted it to be a surprise. But now”—she choked back a sob—“you will never even know its name.”

The Prelate winced, trying to keep his own emotions in check. “I fought through the Sangheili ships. I made it to the stalk.” But then his rage began to build, just as it always did. “But the dome was overrun! And the Minister told me that the Flood—!”

“Boru’a’Neem!” Yalar said with disgust. Her head rose up on her long neck like a serpent preparing to strike. “You went wherever he ordered you to go! Did whatever he needed you to do!” Her voice plunged to a whisper and then stepped back to a scream. “But when we really needed you . . . You. Weren’t. Here!”

Their child loosed a full-throated wail, wriggling its little limbs inside the blanket. Yalar rocked it close to her chest and continued:

Take my hand, walk with me . . . !

But she was out of tune now and frantic. Her body shook. She began to cough. Arms trembling, Yalar thrust their baby toward the Prelate. “Take it, Tem!” she gasped. “Take it and go—!”

Then her lips exploded open, releasing a cloud of Flood spores.

The first time the Prelate had this dream, this was the moment he woke. Eyes wide and screaming. But he'd since learned to fight the urge to wake—coaxed his body to release some of the Promissory-implanted chemicals designed to enhance his combat capabilities to keep him focused on the dream. Each time the nightmare came, he was able to stay submerged a little longer. Like a diver with limited air, he willed his body to relax into the depths of his despair. . . .

Tem'Bhetek now snatched the wailing child out of his wife's arms and leapt away as pulsing green boils rose on Yalar's neck and shoulders. Flood tendrils, slick and sharp, burst from these sores, tore through her gown, and coiled around her body. She pitched backward onto their pallet, thrashing her arms and legs and shrieking as the parasite burrowed into her brain.

Just then, the balcony window shattered. Light stabbed through the curtains as a Phantom dropship hovering outside opened fire with its nose-mounted turret. The Prelate rolled to the floor and curled around his child, shielding it from the plasma bolts as they seared overhead and burned into the bedchamber's walls. Even before the firing stopped, the Prelate heard the clang of armored feet, the telltale crack and sizzle of activating energy blades. He rose to find three Sangheili in silver armor circling the pallet, eyeing his Flood-stricken wife.

"Don't touch her!" the Prelate roared, rising to his feet.

The Sangheili snapped their heads in his direction. The one closest to the Prelate snarled and raised its blade. . . .

But right as it swung to cut the Prelate down, tendrils shot out from Yalar's body and wrapped around the Sangheili's sword arm, stopping it mid-swing. More of the muscular Flood fibers whipped around the Sangheili's neck. Then Yalar flung herself backward, pulling the warrior with her, using whatever part of her mind that remained in her control to try to keep her family safe.

But it wasn't enough.

The other Sangheili went to work, slashing Yalar with their blades until there was nothing left but sizzling flesh and bloody cloth. Feet locked to the floor, Tem loosed a guttural, wordless cry that ended in a wail as the Sangheili prodded Yalar's remains with the two-pronged

tips of their blades.

Then the swordsmen came for him.

In the Prelate's dream, the Sangheili's eyes began to glow bright as their blades as they slid through the slanting shadows cast by the tattered curtains. Their limbs stretched, and they flowed around him like quicksilver, rattling their bony jaws.

"I'll kill you!" The Prelate squared his stance, cradled his child with one hand, and made a fist with the other. "I will kill every last one of you!"

Then his baby laughed. The Prelate looked down into the infant's eyes; one blue, one green, just like his own. The child gurgled a string of happy nonsense words.

Yalar's voice echoed in the shadows:

Into the light, forever free . . .

And Tem felt a surge of hope: *Tonight is not the same. Tonight I will save my child!*

He activated his anti-grav belt and launched himself through the cordon of Sangheili, twisting to avoid their blades. As the Prelate hurtled through the window frame, the Phantom's turret tracked him and opened fire. But Tem was already halfway into a dive that took him under the Phantom's belly, beyond its field of fire. Flying with his back to the lower districts, the Prelate stared at his reflection as it rippled across the Phantom's polished hull. *Stay asleep, just a little longer*. . . . Then he was up behind the dropship, where he maxed power to his belt and shot toward the holy city's star.

The atmosphere was thick with spores now. The other towers, the arched walls of the dome—everything except the star's bright disc had disappeared into the murk. Two empty barges appeared above the Prelate, trailing limp streamers and shedding flowers. He jerked hard right to avoid a collision. A tower somewhere off to his left groaned as its anti-grav systems failed. Tem waited for the crack and boom of exploding stone as the tower hit the lower districts. But instead there was only a wet, muffled crunch. He looked down and saw dark shapes moving in the sea of spores below: tendrils winding back and forth, like animals tracking his scent.

Then the spores began to thin, and the Prelate burst through the top of the cloud, no more than a kilometer below the simulated star. This close, he could clearly see how the illusion worked—how the star was really just a broad disc of many overlapping energy fields that filled a hole in the apex of the dome wide enough to accommodate the Forerunner Dreadnought, should the San'Shyuum ever need to move it. Viewing platforms hung around the rim of the disc, and the Prelate knew these were linked to passages through High Charity's hull, emergency shuttle bays, and, finally, escape from the nightmare. *You're close! Closer than you've ever been before!* Tem willed his belt to lift him higher, faster. . . .

A Flood tendril slashed up from below, striking him across the arms and pulling his child from his chest. The little bundle tumbled down and out of reach, a loose corner of its copper blanket fluttering behind it. The Prelate spun head over heels, kicking the tendril aside, and dove after his child, following its cries as it careened toward the undulating clouds of spores. An instant before the child disappeared, Tem caught it by its blanket. Then he arched his neck and spine and, straining against the gee-forces, climbed once again toward the star.

The child was beside itself. There was no laughter now, only tears. The little creature thrashed its arms against the Prelate's chest. He held the infant tight, but this only made it more upset.

It screamed, loud enough to jar Tem half awake. He shut his eyes, took a deep breath . . . and sang.

There is a path, where does it lead?
Take my hand, walk with me!
Into the light, forever free?
Take my hand—!

But before he could finish the verse, tremendous spouts of Flood biomass rose from the clouds; pulsing stalks of half-consumed flesh; grotesque monuments to the holy city's millions of devoured souls. Tendrils sprouted from these stalks, crisscrossing the air above the Prelate. He tried to maneuver through the gruesome thicket, but the Flood lashed around him, trapping his legs, his chest, his child.

Tem'Bhetek strained his anti-grav belt well past its operating limits.

The device's lifting pods buzzed a warning, growing hot and heavy on his hips. . . .

And then, through the fields of the simulated star, the Prelate saw a ship. A gleaming vessel with a hooked prow, the pride of the Sangheili fleet—*Shadow of Intent*, maneuvering into position above the holy city. For most Covenant in need of rescue, seeing this assault carrier so close would be a profound relief. At first, even the Prelate's heart leapt. But his hope shattered as soon as he saw the carrier prepare to fire the plasma fountain in its prow.

"No!" the Prelate shouted. "We're still alive, you Sangheili bastards —!" But the rest of the curse died in his throat as Flood tendrils coiled around his neck and plunged into his mouth. Tem bit down, trying to sever the fleshy cords as they slid rapidly past his teeth. But the Flood held his jaws open, keeping him trapped in a gurgling rictus of rage.

The capacitating torus of *Shadow of Intent*'s plasma fountain quavered as it built its charge. Targeting vanes irised into position around the magnetized muzzle, preparing to direct the superheated gases already flooding the breech. There was no sound when the fountain lit, but High Charity rumbled as a pillar of white-hot fire struck the holy city's star, obliterated its fields, and then lanced into the dome. The Flood clouds ignited with a roar. A wall of pressure and heat rushed toward the Prelate. He struggled in the Flood's grip, his child screeching in his arms, but just as the wall hit—

The Prelate fully woke, his ears ringing with the insistent wail of an alarm that told him his cruiser had successfully made a slipspace exit.

Tem lay on his back upon his cabin's narrow pallet, his black tunic wet with sweat and plastered to his skin. As his heart pounded in his chest, keeping time with the alarm, he felt a Flood tendril slither along his neck. He reached to grab it . . . but of course there was nothing there.

Balling his fists into his eyes and closing his mouth to mute his rage, the Prelate screamed. He had gone deeper into the nightmare than he ever had before, but at the end, there it was: *Shadow of Intent*. There was no hope of saving his family, not even in his dreams.

The Half-Jaw had robbed him even of that.

Tem smashed a fist into his cabin's metal wall, again and again,

until he left a dent in the glossy turquoise panel and his hand was throbbing. *You fool! It never mattered anyway. It was always just a dream!*

For the reality was the Prelate hadn't been inside High Charity when it fell. He had not seen his wife or his newborn child consumed by the Flood. Not with his own eyes.

Instead he had been at the helm of his cruiser, locked in combat with Sangheili warships in the space around the holy city. This fight was the culmination of his long years of training, the climax of the Schism. The Sangheili hadn't expected such a vast and well-prepared mutiny, and in the moments before the human frigate infested with the Flood slipped into the dome, the Prelates and their Jiralhanae crews were winning. But then, one by one, the Prelate-controlled warships had peeled away from the battle to evacuate High Charity's San'Shyuum.

What had been a perfectly executed surprise attack became a defensive scramble as the Prelates switched from trying to defeat the Sangheili warships to merely keeping them at bay while the San'Shyuum filled their own ships and slipped away. At first, the Sangheili let these vessels go. Then, as the threat of the Flood spreading beyond High Charity increased—as the Flood spilled down from the dome to the stalk where the rescue vessels had been docking—the Sangheili sent a message in the clear: ALL SHIPS ATTEMPTING TO LEAVE THIS SECTOR WILL BE DESTROYED.

The Flood had almost doomed the galaxy once before, and the Sangheili weren't willing to let that happen again.

Shadow of Intent was the linchpin of this grim quarantine, and the Prelates had no ships that could match it one-on-one. The plan had been to overwhelm the carrier with multiple cruisers after the Sangheili fleet's lesser vessels had been dispatched. But by then the San'Shyuum fleet had dwindled. And while Tem'Bhetek was still in the fight, his focus had shifted from how to destroy *Shadow of Intent* to how to save his family. When Tem received the Minister of Preparation's desperate call for rescue, he quickly disengaged and hastened to the stalk.

As soon as the Prelate was docked and had a hard line to the city's

communication network, he had attempted to call Yalar. But the network had either been down or overloaded, and he couldn't reach her. Waiting on the boarding gantry for the Minister to arrive, he had thought of abandoning his post, flying up into the dome. And he had just made up his mind to do it when the Minister's Jiralhanae honor guard hustled him through the gantry airlock. Even though the shaggy warriors' panic-stricken reek told him volumes about what had happened in the dome above, the Prelate asked the Minister: "My family. Can they be saved?"

Boru'a'Neem had leaned forward in his throne and grasped the Prelate's arm. "The Sacred Promissory is lost!" His eyes were filled with a wild and consuming fear. "Nothing lives inside the city now except the Flood!"

This had been too much to take. The Prelate had shrugged off the Minister's grip and staggered toward the airlock.

"They're gone, Prelate!" the Minister shouted after him. "There is nothing you can do!"

Tem'Bhetek's knees had buckled under the weight of this pronouncement. And the only thing that had brought him back to his feet—the only thing that kept him from kneeling there in the gantry until the Flood spilled down the stalk and devoured him as it had his wife and child—was the Minister's solemn promise:

"Help me escape this place, and I swear, we will make the Sangheili pay for what they've done!"

At that moment, the Prelate had no real understanding of what the Minister meant. It would be many days before his mind could process anything but grief and he learned the full extent of the Sangheili's betrayal. How they had failed to contain the Flood on the sacred Halo ring. How the Arbiter had turned on the Covenant by forging an alliance with the Flood's Gravemind as well as with their human foes. By that time, the Prelate's cruiser had joined a flotilla of San'Shyuum ships that had managed to escape High Charity. This brief rendezvous was joyous for some as they were reunited with loved ones thought lost.

But there was no news of Yalar or his child, and by the time the Prelate and the Minister had broken away from the flotilla and set

their course for the secret Forerunner installation, all the Prelate's hope had turned to vengeance.

There was a heavy knock on the cabin door, and the Prelate admitted his first officer, a thick-browed Jiralhanae with grizzled fur and one shoulder that stooped lower than the other. As the officer confirmed their arrival in a second Sangheili colony system and relayed the details of their latest scans of the system's star, the Prelate silently donned his battle armor.

The deep black plates were light but strong, the finest creation of the Minister of Preparation's foundries. Self-repair systems had removed all the damage the armor had sustained on Rahnelo. The Prelate smoothed the armor's interlocking bands around his neck, removed a plasma rifle from his weapons locker, and holstered it in the small of his back. He removed his helmet from its stand and paused to look at his own reflection in the glazed surface of its chevron visor. *Would you know me now, Yalar? Would you walk this path with me?*

"The settlements have seen us," the Jiralhanae said. "They are broadcasting distress signals on all channels. Do you want us to jam them?"

"No. Let the signals through." The Prelate tucked his helmet under his arm and marched past the Jiralhanae toward the command deck.

Let the Half-Jaw hear them scream.

Shadow of Intent exited slipspace near the colony world Duraan, third planet of five in close orbit around its system's red dwarf star.

Like its neighboring worlds, Duraan was gravity locked. One side of the mottled, orange-and-brown, arid planet was bathed in constant starlight, the other in perpetual dark. But even half-habitable worlds were rare, and Duraan's wide-open spaces appealed to minor Sangheili families whose ambitions were constrained by the limited real estate on the crowded worlds closer to Sanghelios. Here there was ample room to lay the foundations of new keeps, and three generations ago, thousands of Sangheili had begun settling the shores of the spidery

seas that spattered Duraan's light side like ink blown on parchment. Far from the front lines of the human war, these settlements had enjoyed a quiet existence . . . until now.

It had taken the Half-Jaw three days to journey from Rahnelo to Duraan. While *Shadow of Intent* was tunneling through slipspace, the carrier had been unable to receive any communications. Now, with its titanic maneuvering engines pulsing with just enough power to stay two hundred thousand kilometers ahead of Duraan on its path around the red dwarf star, *Shadow of Intent*'s command deck rang with frantic transmissions from the planet's many small settlements, all begging for assistance.

"Target in sight!" the Blademaster said. The old Sangheili's fists were wrapped around the scuffed bronze railing of the command deck's central holo-tank. He leaned forward and cocked an eye at the real-time image of Duraan that filled the charged air above the tank's petaled projector. "He's firing!" Icons blossomed around a glowing representation of the Prelate's cruiser as it unleashed a volley of plasma. A few moments later, the loudest of the settlements fell silent.

"Intercept course calculated!" a Sangheili officer shouted from his post, one of many dimly lit alcoves spaced between thick beams that ribbed the command deck's walls.

"All weapons locked and tracking!" another officer said.

The Blademaster tightened his grip on the railing, making his armored knuckles creak. "Shipmaster, I recommend an immediate attack!"

Rtas 'Vadum sat in his command chair, the only seat on an elevated platform above and behind the holo-tank. Throughout *Shadow of Intent*'s exit from slipspace and the flurry of activity that followed, the Half-Jaw had been silent. Elbows bent on his chair's worn metal arms, his ruined chin resting in the valley of his fists, Rtas stared hard at the holo-tank. When he finally spoke, it was quiet, almost to himself: "He could have glassed every settlement and been long gone before we arrived." More silence, and then: "Why is he still here?"

"He miscalculated." The Blademaster turned to face the Half-Jaw. "We killed plenty of Prelates at High Charity. They aren't perfect."

"And they killed plenty of us," Rtas replied. As Vul 'Soran chewed

on that, the Half-Jaw rose, stepped down a ramp to the command-deck floor, and joined the Blademaster at the holo-tank. “Show me the scan of that star.”

With a few quick taps on a control panel embedded in the railing, the Blademaster shifted the image in the tank. Duraan shrunk to centimeter size, and the red dwarf became a giant. *Shadow of Intent*’s databases had grown stale during the human war, at least as far as Sangheili colonial scientific surveys were concerned. But Rtas had learned all he could about Duraan during their slipspace journey, and he knew the planet’s star was at its maximum, a period of extreme disturbance in its magnetic field resulting in frequent, violent stellar storms.

One of these storms was raging now. Two overlapping arms of fire, each one millions of kilometers long, lashed out from a confluence of dark spots on the star’s crimson surface. Invisible to the naked eye, radiation from these hellish upheavals was now racing toward Duraan in the form of light-speed particle waves—and similar storm fronts had likely been hitting the planet for days. Duraan’s magnetosphere would have shielded the Sangheili settlers from the storm’s worst effects. But their star’s distemper was the least of their concerns.

“He’s maneuvering. Heading for another settlement.” The Blademaster shook his head at the star. “Storm or not, we must attack!”

At full capacity, *Shadow of Intent*’s energy shields could withstand a punishing amount of firepower, much more than the Prelate’s cruiser could mete out. But *Shadow of Intent* was no match for the turbulent star, and even now the carrier’s warning systems were flashing in the command deck’s empty engineering cocoons. The officers who would have been stationed there had the ship been at full capacity had moved nearer to the carrier’s reactors to manage the slipspace exit. The Half-Jaw, the Blademaster, and two officers responsible for *Shadow of Intent*’s navigation and weapons were the deck’s only crew.

“His shields will be weak,” the Blademaster said.

“Ours will be, too.”

“We outgun him!”

“A fact I’m sure he clearly understands.”

The Blademaster lowered his voice from its usual roar. “I know you as well as I know my own sons, Rtas ‘Vadum. But by the time you puzzle out this Prelate’s plan, thousands more Sangheili will be dead.”

The Half-Jaw knew his old comrade was right. But as much as his hearts ached for the Sangheili on Duraan, he knew the choices he made in the next few moments would also mean life or death for everyone on his ship. And if he chose poorly—if he and his warriors perished and *Shadow of Intent* was destroyed—who would stop the Prelate then? How many other worlds would he leave burning in his wake?

Rtas took a deep breath and slowly rolled his armored shoulders. *It’s not the battles you’ve fought that make you tired. It’s realizing you still have more to fight.*

“Accelerate to attack speed!” the Half-Jaw said, loud enough for the officers to hear. “Keep the shields up as long as you can. The storm coming off that star will harm every exposed system on this ship!”

The Blademaster opened a ship-wide channel and relayed the Half-Jaw’s order to the rest of *Shadow of Intent*’s crew. Fully loaded, the carrier’s decks would have thundered with thousands of footfalls as those onboard rushed to their action stations. But now, except for the deep rumble of its maneuvering engines initiating a turn toward Duraan, *Shadow of Intent* was largely silent. It was a strange way to go into battle, Rtas thought, and the relative quiet only increased his unease.

Having walked into plenty of traps over the years, the Half-Jaw knew one when he saw one. The reason he was still alive was, by this point, he usually had a pretty good idea of the terrible trick his opponent was about to play. But while the Half-Jaw didn’t yet fully understand the Prelate’s scheme, he now possessed a new and vital clue.

He knew the cruiser’s name.

As *Shadow of Intent* completed its turn, the Half-Jaw keyed a series of commands into the holo-tank’s controls so it displayed a view from the carrier’s prow. He then opened a secondary perspective that showed a zoomed image of the Prelate’s ship.

“*Kel ‘Darsam Silket* . . .” Rtas said.

The Blademaster nodded in agreement. "*Spear of Light*."

The cruiser's name wasn't painted on its prow like it would be on a human vessel. Instead the Half-Jaw and Blademaster had read the cruiser's name in its distinctive shape, in the battle scars along its hull, for they had both seen the ship before.

Despite its illustrious name, the Prelate's cruiser was of an older design that predated the Human-Covenant Conflict. It had been one of a group of ships the Sangheili had given to Jiralhanae chieftains whose loyalty the San'Shyuum wanted to reward. These "gifts" were common in the scramble to meet the human threat. At that time, it had made good sense to have as many vessels as possible in the fight, even though most of these ships had been deliberately hobbled—their major weapons and other systems disabled—to keep the prideful and cantankerous Jiralhanae Chieftains from becoming too powerful. No self-respecting Sangheili shipmaster had wanted to give up the possibility of frontline glory to train the Jiralhanae in the operation of these underpowered, surplus ships. And that was where the Prelates had come in.

They were considered purely technical advisors. Like all good lies, this was half true. But what the San'Shyuum left unsaid was that the Prelates, on the order of the Prophet of Truth, were secretly retrofitting the Jiralhanae's ships and training them to attack the Sangheili. Contrary to what he preached, Truth knew only a blessed few could follow him on the Great Journey. And after the Sangheili committed the ultimate sin of losing the first Halo ring, they quickly fell out of favor. So the Prelates redoubled their clandestine preparations and, as much as Rtas hated to admit it, had the Flood not intervened in the battle for High Charity, the Prelates likely would have succeeded in carrying out Truth's wishes.

"Enemy cruiser initiating a burn!" the navigation officer said. "He's heading for the dark side of the planet!"

Three-dimensional space gave modern Sangheili shipmasters many more options for engaging their foes than when they clashed long ago on the seas of Sanghelios. But tactics still boiled down to the same age-old choice: hit your enemy head-on, or maneuver for advantage. Given *Shadow of Intent*'s dominant firepower, the Half-Jaw's decision

made perfect sense.

"Plot an intercept course the opposite way around the planet," Rtas told the navigation officer. "We'll meet him nose-to-nose." Then, to weapons: "Shield status?"

"Eighty percent and falling, Shipmaster. Stellar particle count increasing."

"No way to avoid the storm," Vul 'Soran said, "but that blade cuts both ways."

The Half-Jaw nodded in agreement. "His reactors are weaker. His shields will drop before ours." But he left unsaid: *So why isn't this Prelate running? Why isn't he firing up his slipspace drive and avoiding a fight when the odds are so clearly in our favor?*

Hundreds of capital ships had taken part in the brutal, close-quarters melee that was the battle for High Charity. In that fight, the Prelates had more total ships under their command than the Sangheili, but cruisers had been the largest vessels in the Prelates' fleet. The Sangheili had *Shadow of Intent* and one other assault carrier, *Eternal Reward*, which should have tipped the balance in their favor. But in a surprise betrayal that began the battle, the three Prelate-controlled cruisers and five Jiralhanae destroyers tasked to support *Eternal Reward* opened fire at close range, damaging that carrier so badly that its surviving crew was forced to abandon ship. All the attacking vessels were annihilated save one: *Spear of Light*.

Rtas assumed this was the same Prelate who had commanded *Spear of Light* that day . . . the one who had gone on to disable or destroy six more Sangheili ships at High Charity—two of which were cruisers of superior type—before retreating to participate in the evacuation of the city. This Prelate had kept *Spear of Light* docked to the stalk until the Flood overran it, and then shot his way through the Sangheili blockade that had halted dozens of other San'Shyuum ships.

The Half-Jaw frowned, considering the puzzle of his opponent's plan from a different angle. *This Prelate is a fighter, and he clearly wants to go another round.* . . . And then a vital, missing piece fell into place.

Rahnelo and Duraan were bait.

The Prelate had lured *Shadow of Intent* to these remote worlds just so he could isolate and destroy it—so he could finish the fight he

started at High Charity. The Half-Jaw was now certain of this. He just couldn't see how the Prelate planned to do it.

As *Spear of Light* completed its orbit around Duraan, everyone on *Shadow of Intent*'s command deck fell silent. The Blademaster marched a nervous lap around the holo-tank, hands clasped behind his back. Rtas did his best to ignore a painful twinge in his missing jaws.

The navigation officer broke the silence. "Target back in visual range! No deviation from intercept course!"

"Forward plasma cannons fully charged!" the weapons officer announced. "Ready to fire on your command, Shipmaster!"

Inside the holo-tank, *Spear of Light* emerged around the limb of Duraan's dark side. *Shadow of Intent*'s cluster of intelligent circuits had been estimating the cruiser's speed, trajectory, and other flight characteristics based on data processed before it disappeared behind the planet. This computational matrix was primitive compared to the artificial intelligences that ran most human ships. But now that the carrier's many electronic eyes had reestablished line of sight, the matrix realized it had made one significant miscalculation—that the Prelate had done something unexpected while out of range—and it quickly corrected the error.

The Half-Jaw was the first to notice the change inside the holo-tank. "Look," he said, pointing to the image of *Spear of Light*. "He's turned his ship around."

Squinting close to the tank, the Blademaster couldn't quite believe what he was seeing: *Spear of Light* was now hurtling engines-first toward *Shadow of Intent*. "Why would he do that?!"

But Rtas had no answer. All he knew was that the Prelate's trap was closing and he was running out of time to stop the jaws from snapping shut. "Shield status," he growled. "Both ships!"

"His no longer register on the scan," the weapons officer replied. "Ours are sixty percent forward, twenty percent lateral and aft—but falling fast! Optimal range in fifteen seconds!"

Shadow of Intent had seven heavy plasma cannons evenly spaced in a deep depression that ran port to starboard around its prow. The weapons could fire individually, or combine their energy into a single devastating mass that would annihilate the smaller cruiser. But there

was a catch. Rtas needed to lower *Shadow of Intent*'s shields before he fired any of its plasma weapons, otherwise the shaped energy charges would detonate against the inner surface of the shield, wreaking havoc on his own ship instead of the Prelate's.

This was standard procedure—a necessary dropping of one's guard before mounting an assault. The Prelate would know this, would have planned for this. But the Half-Jaw had no more time to ponder, and he made the only decision that made any sort of sense.

Forget how tired you are and throw the hardest punch you can!

"Pool all channels into cannon number four!" Rtas shouted to his weapons officer. "Fire when ready!"

The command deck dimmed as *Shadow of Intent*'s reactors shunted power to the plasma cannons. The shields around the carrier's prow scintillated and then dispersed. A split second later, a bright magenta streak of superheated gases wrapped in magnetic guidance fields shot out from the carrier's nose. If *Spear of Light* had taken evasive action, the plasma torpedo would have altered its trajectory to stay on target. But the cruiser kept right on coming.

"Our shields are back up!" the weapons officer cried. "Five seconds to impact!"

The Blademaster leaned closer to the tank, his eager eyes glued to an icon that showed the estimated point of impact. "We'll hit his cruiser dead astern and burn a hole right through it!"

But as the tremendous plasma torpedo neared *Spear of Light*, something strange began to happen. While the ship hadn't deviated from its path, the torpedo's fields sparked and flared as if lit by an invisible flame. Plasma vented quickly through widening weak spots in the torpedo's fields, and it veered off course—only by a few degrees, but enough so that it only grazed the cruiser's portside plating instead of slamming into its engine cluster.

"Minimal damage to target!" the weapons officer said.

The Blademaster pounded a fist on the holo-tank railing. "Impossible! How could we have missed?!"

"The storm . . ." Rtas said, as another puzzle piece snapped into place. He now pictured the red dwarf's maelstrom hitting Duraan's light side, churning against the planet's magnetic field and then

spilling around its dark side in violent, unpredictable vortices of highly charged particles. These whorls of radiation had torn away the torpedo's fields just as they were slowly reducing *Shadow of Intent*'s shields—just as they had already disabled the shields around *Spear of Light*.

"Quick charge forward cannons!" the Half-Jaw barked. "Divert all necessary power from lateral and aft shields! Fire all cannons in sequence, quarter-second dispersal!"

Again the lights on the command deck dimmed. The cruiser shuddered as the cannons shot in quick succession. In the holo-tank, seven smaller torpedoes streaked toward *Spear of Light*, which was now less than ten thousand kilometers from *Shadow of Intent*. Already the torpedoes' fields were shimmering wildly as the storm did its worst. But the torpedoes had much less distance to cover now, and Rtas only needed one to hit. . . .

Suddenly a miniature star erupted in the holo-tank as *Spear of Light*'s engines engaged, full thrust. The Half-Jaw watched three of his shots go wide, a fourth boil a deep scar across the cruiser's back, and the rest evaporate in the particle furnace of the cruiser's exhaust. Venting atmosphere and shuddering terribly as it decelerated at a rate far exceeding its structural limits, *Spear of Light* came alongside *Shadow of Intent* close enough to scrape the outer limits of the carrier's portside shields—but these shields were gone now, their energy siphoned off for the Half-Jaw's hasty volley.

Both ships were flying side by side at point-blank range. For the moment, however, neither could harm the other. The Half-Jaw couldn't order another plasma shot without suffering splash damage to his own ship. And even *Shadow of Intent*'s less powerful point-laser batteries would need time to recharge.

"They'll be running for their escape pods . . ." the Blademaster said. But his boisterous voice betrayed his age, and he stammered a little, trying to rationalize everything that had just occured. "The Prelate has no choice! If . . . if he stays where he is, we take him apart with lasers. If he moves, we use the cannons. Surely he knows he's doomed?!"

But "escape pods" was all the Half-Jaw heard. For in that moment, Rtas felt his enemy's trap snap shut, and he finally understood: The

Prelate never intended to destroy *Shadow of Intent*. He planned to steal it.

"All hands!" Rtas shouted into a ship-wide channel. "Arm for battle! Close quarters!" Then, locking eyes with the Blademaster: "This Prelate will not take our ship!"

The escape pod blasted out of its mooring socket, and Tem'Bhetek slammed backward into his harness. A reactive gel layer inside his armor protected him from the punishing acceleration as the pod sped across the narrow gap of space between the two capital ships. The pod's viewport blast shields were down, and it was running dark. But through the low-light optics in his visor, the Prelate could see the sharp outlines of five Jiralhanae crammed into harnesses around him, each one fully enclosed in deep blue, vacuum-rated armor that glimmered with reflections of the pod's flashing status lights.

Behind the Prelate's pod, nine more were launching, each with five Jiralhanae inside. These fifty warriors—the entirety of *Spear of Light*'s remaining crew—knew they had just punched a one-way ticket, that there was no turning back. But whatever nervousness the Brutes might have felt when they were near the miniature Halo was absent now. Hurtling toward an enemy, weapons in hand, these ruthless creatures were in their element. Tem felt a surge of confidence. *We are going to make it inside that carrier and tear the Sangheili apart!*

It had been an audacious plan. A single light cruiser against an assault carrier. Outmatched in arms and armor, the Prelate had known one thing for certain: *Spear of Light* would never survive the fight. But the genius of his strategy was accepting the inevitable destruction of his ship and turning it to his advantage.

The Prelate had visited Duraan's system once before, on one of the many training missions that had kept him far from home. Back then he and his inexperienced Jiralhanae crew had been surprised at just how rapidly Duraan's red dwarf star had degraded their cruiser's shields. But the Prelate had filed away this miscalculation, as he did with all his missteps, as a tool for self-improvement. Years later, when

he had wracked his brain for the best place to spring a trap, his memories of the red dwarf's powerful storms, as well as Duraan's small, poorly armed settlements, quickly sorted this planet to the top of the list.

Like most plans, this one had variables the Prelate couldn't control, the biggest of which was the Half-Jaw himself. The red dwarf could only do so much to degrade *Shadow of Intent*'s defenses. For the Prelate's gambit to work, he needed the Half-Jaw to throw everything he had at *Spear of Light*—to so desperately want to kill the Prelate here and now before he could do any more harm that he would be willing to expend *Shadow of Intent*'s many advantages in a single devastating blow.

The Half-Jaw had swung hard, but the Prelate was still standing. And now the odds were no longer in the Sangheili shipmaster's favor. In a close-up fight, the Prelate knew his Jiralhanae could match any Sangheili. And as for the Half-Jaw? Tem'Bhetek fingered the hardlight shield projector and plasma rifle attached to his anti-grav belt. *I will deal with him myself.*

Five seconds out of the socket, and *Shadow of Intent*'s point lasers still hadn't fired on his pod. This was good, because the pods had no significant shielding; even a single laser salvo would mean the end of the Prelate and his Jiralhanae. The pods' primary advantage—the one thing that made them superior to standard boarding craft in this situation—was their straight-line acceleration. They were designed to get away from a dying ship very quickly. And a burst of speed was all the Prelate needed to reach *Shadow of Intent*.

Now more than halfway across the gap, the Prelate knew the laser batteries must be down, crippled by the stellar storm. Which left one last problem to overcome: the pods had no rams—reinforced docking gantries built into the noses of Covenant boarding craft that they used to lamprey onto a target vessel's hull and cut their way inside.

Instead, the pods could enter only through a door that was already open. And fortunately for the Prelate, *Shadow of Intent* had one that was very hard to miss: the entrance to its portside hangar. An energy field barred the hangar, keeping the carrier's artificial atmosphere in and all unauthorized vessels out. On a feed from his pod's forward-

facing camera that the Prelate had slaved to his visor, he could see the field's telltale violet glow. But the hangar door was flickering, clearly weakened by the storm, and the Prelate knew their velocity would carry the pods safely through.

Fifteen seconds after the Prelate's pod had burst from its socket, its smart circuits cut the main engine thrust and fired its maneuvering rockets, applying as much braking force as possible. A moment later, his pod was across the hangar threshold, still moving fast, but angled toward the deck. The pod landed hard on its belly, rocked onto its rounded nose, and screeched forward at an angle, shedding ablative tiles, stabilizing fins, and other exterior parts until it ground to a halt halfway across the hangar. As the Prelate wrestled out of his harness, he could hear the other pods hit and rasp across the deck, occasionally colliding with a bone-jarring crunch.

But when the Prelate blew the seals on his pod's airlock and moved outside, more wobbly on his legs than he would have liked, he was relieved to see that all ten pods had made it safely inside the hangar. Their hatches exploded open, and the Jiralhanae emerged, some a little shaken, but all with weapons ready.

The bay stretched out before the Prelate, half a kilometer to the carrier's starboard side, where there was another large energy-field door. To his right were passages to the carrier's reactors and engines. To his left were vehicle repair bays and armories that led to *Shadow of Intent*'s ship-to-ground gravity lift. Beyond the lift were passages that spanned a graceful arc connecting the ship's teardrop stern section to its hooked prow. In the dead center of the prow, protected by hundreds of meters of hull plating and honeycombed superstructure, was the carrier's command deck. This was Tem'Bhetek's objective, and if he could survive the sprint from here to there, this carrier would be his.

Bright green plasma bolts skipped across the hangar floor. The Prelate spun back behind his pod as the barrage spattered up and over the ship and then hit a Jiralhanae out in the open on the other side. The Jiralhanae's chest plate buckled, his organs boiled and burst, and he fell backward with a mournful howl. As the Brute hit the floor, the Prelate closed his eyes and drew a deep breath . . . and his body did

what it was designed to do.

Of all the Forerunner technologies the San'Shyuum had tried to unlock, genetic engineering had proved the most difficult. This was largely due to the fact that the Forerunners had refined their bio-enhancing tools and procedures for their own physiologies, not for other sentient creatures. Coupled with San'Shyuum taboos against doing anything that might further jeopardize their already limited ability to reproduce, research into this particular brand of Forerunner magic was completely ignored by all of their ministries save one: the Ministry of Preparation.

The Prelate slipped his left hand into his hardlight gauntlet and pulled it away from his belt. He activated the gauntlet with a forearm snap, and as its bright blue, crescent-shaped shield appeared at his wrist, the Prelate felt the world slow around him. The roars of the Jiralhanae and sharp reports of their weapons stretched and faded into the background. By the time the Prelate was around the front of his pod, shield up and sprinting forward, his enhanced nervous system and musculature were already fully engaged, and he now acted almost without thinking.

The plasma fire had come from the aft side of the hangar. Six Sangheili had emerged at the top of a ramp leading to *Shadow of Intent*'s reactors. All of these warriors were lightly armored and carried only plasma pistols, and had likely been tasked with engineering duties rather than ship security. The Prelate went right for these unlucky first responders, half running, half gliding across the hangar, dodging their wild shots with quick lateral pulses from his anti-grav belt and swatting away accurate ones with his hardlight shield. In mere moments, the Prelate was across the hangar and up the ramp, a few paces from his foes.

He swung his shield in a low arc at one Sangheili, severing both its legs at the back-bent junctions of its calves and elongated ankles. There was barely any resistance as the shield's photonic edge slid through armor, flesh, and bone. Spinning through the cut, the Prelate caught two more Sangheili with his primary weapon, a variant of the Covenant plasma rifle preferred by the Jiralhanae. Colored red instead of blue, the snub-nosed weapon was nicknamed "blood-hand," and

true to its name, it fired twice as fast as the standard model and required a firm grip to keep it from bucking off target. The Prelate expended half his rifle's charge, hitting the two Sangheili in their lightly armored abdomens. As they crumpled to the deck, the Prelate squared his stance and brought his elbow up into the neck of a fourth charging warrior. The Prelate wheeled to follow this Sangheili as it fell, and then pulsed his rifle into its astonished face.

By then, a squad of four Jiralhanae had made it halfway from the pods to the ramp, and they dispatched the last two Sangheili with their own rapid-firing plasma rifles.

Tem'Bhetek forced himself to take two deep breaths. Enhanced hormones were surging through his system, but he didn't want to peak too early. He and the other Prelates had trained long and hard in the Sacred Promissory. Deep in its halls within the rocky foundation of High Charity's dome, they had learned the dangers of pushing their altered bodies too far: sudden debilitating exhaustion, seizures, and, in rare cases, death.

In short bursts, the Minster of Preparation had told the Prelates, *you can defeat any foe*. Even, the Minister had hoped, the humans' demonic Spartan soldiers.

But that had been a different time and a different war. As far as Tem'Bhetek knew, he was now the last of his kind. All the other Prelates had died at High Charity.

And if you aren't careful, you're going to join them!

Uncannily quick, the Prelate raised his hardlight shield and deflected three shots from a Covenant carbine rifle. The bright green hypersonic slugs ricocheted with glassy pings, sparking radioactive fuel. A glance to his right, and the Prelate identified the shooter: an Unggoy standing on the other side of the bay, at the top of a bow side ramp. Two squads of Sangheili rangers were spilling down the ramp past the Unggoy. Mixed in among the silver-suited warriors was a Sangheili armored red, carrying an energy lance. Even at this distance, the Prelate knew this Sangheili was female—and familiar . . . but he had no time to collect his thoughts before his body was sprinting forward, preparing to meet these new threats.

"Squads four and five, join squad two! Take the reactors!" the

Prelate ordered as plasma fire sizzled past him from behind. Without looking, he knew more Sangheili were emerging from the engineering bays, but he guessed they were small in number and that the remaining Jiralhanae could handle them. “The rest of you, to me!”

The Jiralhanae he’d tasked against the oncoming rangers were already charging in that direction, some of them bent forward in a feral hunch, pawing the deck with their armored claws. But when these Brutes were within leaping distance of their foes, the rangers activated the maneuvering jets embedded in their armored shoulders and heels. The carrier’s artificial gravity was still operational, and while the jets’ chemical propellants performed far better in zero-gee, they helped the rangers match the impact force of the heavier Jiralhanae. After a terrible crash of armor and a quick skirmish in which five Jiralhanae and three rangers fell—one with a cut across the neck from the Prelate’s shield—the two sides retreated into a stalemate, trading shots from the cover of loose, opposing rows of crated Phantom parts.

Although the Jiralhanae still outnumbered the Elite rangers almost two to one, the Prelate knew he couldn’t afford to get bogged down. His plan relied on surprise and speed, and he now had precious little of both. He had no firm idea how many Sangheili were aboard *Shadow of Intent*, nor how many were still between him and the command deck. But more were certain to spill into the hangar soon. “Squads one and two: disengage and head for the command deck!” the Prelate shouted. “All other squads: covering fire! Keep those rangers pinned!”

Instantly, the Jiralhanae unleashed a volley of fragmentation grenades from their heavy, belt-fed launchers. As the grenades’ orange-and-blue explosions filled the enemy’s position with shrapnel, the Prelate sprinted toward the same ramp the rangers had used to enter the bay. But as he accelerated, the Prelate saw from the corner of his eye that the Unggoy and the red-armored Sangheili female were breaking cover to try to cut him off. As much as it galled him to avoid a fight, the Prelate would not stop to engage them. His primary objective was the command deck—and the only enemy that really mattered was the Half-Jaw.

A clang of armor behind the Prelate told him his rear guard had

tangled with his two pursuers. As the Prelate topped the ramp and sped into the passage beyond, he checked the motion tracker in his visor and noted seven Jiralhanae charging close behind him. These were all the troops he'd have to help him take the command deck, and as the Prelate felt a dizziness creeping up the back of his skull—his enhanced nervous system's first warning of excessive exertion—he throttled his speed and let the Jiralhanae catch up.

Tem'Bhetek didn't need a map to the command deck. In his mind's eye, he saw *Shadow of Intent*'s passages spread out before him. He knew the carrier so well that he often found sleep by making phantom sprints through its warrens of anodized, deep purple corridors. If he was fortunate, these waking dreams would carry with him into slumber, replacing his usual nightmarish journey through High Charity.

But quite often, the two dreams would bleed together.

Tem would see Yalar walking *Shadow of Intent*'s twisting trapezoidal halls, her thin yellow gown billowing behind her, only to disappear around the bend of a passage or whisk up a gravity lift before he could reach her. Sometimes Yalar would be waiting for him on the command deck, sitting in the Half-Jaw's empty chair, staring at him with sad eyes, cradling their crying child. . . .

The Prelate shook his head, forcing himself to breathe. He was nearing *Shadow of Intent*'s gravity lift, which was halfway to the command deck. Muscles aching with spent fury, the Prelate knew he had just a few more bursts of hyper-lethal speed before his body completely seized. With his Jiralhanae panting behind him, the Prelate raced through a four-way intersection into a high-ceilinged muster bay, slowed as he passed through one of the bay's sally ports, and then came to a full stop on the wide platform that ringed the gravity lift beyond.

Shadow of Intent had been the bane of other ships, human and Covenant alike. But it was also a prodigious troop carrier that had played a key role in the invasions of many human worlds, and the lift at the center of this large, arched chamber was the fastest way to deploy its armored infantry. Hovering low above the surface of a planet, *Shadow of Intent* could send hundreds of troops per minute

down the lift—or pull them back up, depending on the direction of the anti-grav field, which was produced by a machine of Forerunner design suspended from the roof. When active, this chandelier of crystalline tines projected its field down a circular shaft through the carrier's hull, more than a hundred meters wide and at least that many deep. At the bottom of the shaft was a ponderous armored platform that was always the first item down the lift. Once the platform was placed firmly on the ground, it served as the receiving end of the anti-grav field and a temporary firebase for the descending troops.

All of this was familiar to the Prelate from his study of the ship, and while the Jiralhanae that came up behind him were momentarily dazzled by the prismatic light of the gravity lift's Forerunner machinery, the Prelate's eyes immediately focused on the two Sangheili moving fast toward his position. He knew them by their armor: the Half-Jaw and his Blademaster, running opposite ways around the lift's yawning shaft.

Tem had always imagined he'd kill the Half-Jaw on the command deck. It seemed a fitting stage for the fight that would determine who controlled the mighty ship.

No matter. I will gut him here and watch his blood spill down the lift.

The Prelate willed his body again to its full potential. . . .

But before he could unleash it, he felt three sharp slaps between his shoulders and he staggered forward onto a knee. The Prelate's shields had kept the carbine's radioactive slugs from penetrating his armor, and the chemicals in his bloodstream had dulled the pain. But craning his long neck around to zero in on the shooter, the Prelate was shocked to see that the Unggoy, as well as the red-armored Sangheili female and four rangers, had already caught up to his Jiralhanae rear guard—and was shooting past them. Tem cursed his decision to slow his pace as he turned to meet his pursuers.

If this Unggoy wants to die first? Very well. The Half-Jaw can wait.

And yet it was the female Sangheili who charged the fastest through the sally port, meeting the Prelate as he surged forward. She spun her lance, deflecting a burst from his plasma rifle, and then twirled sideways to avoid a slash from his hardlight shield. The Prelate slid past her in a crouch, swept a ranger off his feet, and then

fired an arc of plasma that sent the other rangers and the Unggoy diving for cover. But the female Sangheili stood her ground, legs planted in a ready stance. She barely flinched as the last of the Prelate's shots burned past her helmet.

"Where are they?" she demanded, her voice low and steady. "My father. My brothers."

The Prelate considered her question for a moment, and then his earlier feelings of familiarity settled into fact. "Dead and gone," he replied, remembering the three Sangheili he had captured on Rahnelo—the ones who had died on their knees before the miniature Halo. "I saw to that myself."

Then she came at him, jaws wide in a high-pitched roar.

She was fast, to be sure, and the Prelate didn't have much experience against a lance. For a few seconds, it took all his focus to deflect her attacks: deep thrusts and counterrotating slashes that she delivered with a dancer's grace and a demon's fury. But then he feigned an opening—dropping his shield and tempting her to overreach—and when she stabbed her lance toward his midsection, the Prelate stepped aside and grabbed the weapon on its shaft, right between her hands, and then pulled her close and smashed his helmet into hers. She staggered backward, dazed, and collapsed onto her side.

The Prelate spun the lance around his hand, altering his grip for a downward thrust to spike the female to the floor. But as he raised the weapon, the Prelate felt the vibration of heavy footfalls from behind, and he spun to meet them instead of making the kill. The lance's energized tip stopped in midair, vibrating and crackling against the Half-Jaw's energy blade.

"If you want my ship," Rtas 'Vadum growled, "you'll need to be faster than that."

The Prelate's wide lips tightened into a sneer. "As you wish."

At long last, he was facing the traitorous Sangheili who had allowed the Flood to invade High Charity—the one responsible for killing his wife and child.

Tem'Bhetek exhaled, released the last of his mental gates, and attacked the Half-Jaw with the full measure of his fury.

Shoving away his foe's sword arm with the lance, the Prelate fired a

point-blank burst with his rifle. But the Half-Jaw flowed with the lance and out of the line of fire, and then ducked under the Prelate's arm and brought his blade around and down onto the Prelate's armored neck. Tem's shield flashed but held, and he shrugged the blade away, answering the Half-Jaw's counterattack with a savage kick to the ribs.

Their duel was a blur until the Prelate found a hole in the Half-Jaw's defenses and caught him in the shoulder with his hardlight shield—a cut that burned through Rtas's armor and into flesh. The two combatants stepped away from each other, breathing heavily. All around them, the Sangheili rangers and Jiralhanae were locked in their own deadly dance.

"You will . . . not win this fight," the Half-Jaw said through ragged breaths.

His own chest heaving, the Prelate flicked his eyes to: the Unggoy leaping onto a Jiralhanae's back and choking it to the floor; and the Blademaster, using one of his plasma swords to sever a Jiralhanae's weapon arm and then sending its head flying with the other. Two more Brutes lay dead on the deck along with the rangers that had taken them down—which left only three of the Prelate's warriors still standing, and he realized that the Half-Jaw just might be right.

Tem's rapidly spinning mind recalled his primary objective: take *Shadow of Intent* and bring it to the Minister of Preparation.

A glance at a troop roster in his visor showed that the Jiralhanae squads in the hangar were still alive. If they secured the reactors and if he made it to the command deck, they could execute a slipspace jump back to the Forerunner installation. . . .

The Prelate glared at the Half-Jaw through the cautionary pain wrapping around his brain.

I may not win this battle, but I can still bring you to your doom.

Casting aside the energy lance, the Prelate increased power to his belt and suddenly soared over the Half-Jaw and into the gravity lift chamber. He was well past the breaking point; his enhanced nerves were frayed and his muscles were beginning to spasm. His vision was constricting but still focused on the only thing that mattered: an open passage on the far side of the shaft leading to the command deck.

Without his Jiralhanae to slow him down, he could easily outpace his pursuers, lock himself inside the command deck, open the airlocks, and vent all the cursed Sangheili into space—

Then the Prelate saw Yalar, standing in the arched doorway to the passage.

Fearful of smashing directly into his beloved, the Prelate slowed his flight across the shaft, and in that moment one of the Blademaster's hurled swords caught him between his shoulders, instantly depleting what remained of his shields and flipping him head over heels. The Prelate's momentum carried him across the gap and onto the platform on the far side, where he landed hard and rolled to a stop, facedown on the burnished metal floor.

"Yalar . . . !" the Prelate groaned as his wife drifted away into the passage. At the same time he heard the staccato bursts of maneuvering jets, felt something land and plant its feet on either side of his waist. But all of these sensations were dull and far away.

"Please!" Tem said, reaching a hand toward the retreating ghost. "Don't go!"

Yalar stopped, looked over her shoulder, and frowned.

This path, where does it lead . . . ?

Then the Unggoy smashed his hard, spiny fist into the side of the Prelate's helmet, and his world went black.

When the Prelate woke, he was uncertain how much time had passed. It couldn't have been that long, for his muscles still ached and his head throbbed from his exertions.

I'm alive, at least. That's a start. . . .

He slowly opened his eyes and discovered he was in a holding cell —a small room with a scuffed metal floor and walls made of hexagonal bronze tiles. One of the cell's walls was filled with a translucent blue energy field that served as its door. Tem'Bhetek was still in his armor, although someone had removed his helmet, and he was slumped at the base of the wall to the left of the cell door. Tem tried to reach up and massage an ache in his head where the Unggoy

had applied his fist, only to find that his hands were bound to his ankles with heavy, magnetized manacles that kept him firmly rooted to the deck.

He was a prisoner. But he was not alone in his cell.

"Your Jiralhanae are all dead," the Half-Jaw said. He was sitting opposite the Prelate on a bench protruding from the wall. The Half-Jaw's silver armor was flecked with Jiralhanae blood. "We just cleaned the last of them out of the engineering decks."

Unfortunate, if not unexpected, news. But the Prelate was glad to see a long, freshly cauterized gash across one of the Half-Jaw's shoulder plates where his hardlight shield had left its mark.

"Did you offer them terms?" The Prelate did his best not to slur his words. But he could taste the residue of chemicals in his mouth, and he knew, after how far he had pushed himself, that he was lucky he could speak at all.

"Yes. They refused."

"If they hadn't, I would have killed them all myself."

For a long time, the Half-Jaw and the Prelate simply stared at each other. Tem saw that his enemy was unarmed. This was almost certainly a diplomatic gesture, meant to put the San'Shyuum at ease. But it had the exact opposite effect. *I hate him more than anything in the universe, and he hopes I will be content to sit here and talk?!*

The Prelate shut his eyes and curled his long neck back against the wall. Its tiles were cool and damp, and he hoped this would slow the anger creeping up his spine.

"We've also captured *Spear of Light*," the Half-Jaw said. "Most of its systems were beyond repair. But the navigational database was intact. We know everywhere you've traveled. Duraan, Rahnelo . . . as well as where you came from—the system you have been using as a base of operations."

But nothing else, the Prelate thought. *Or I would already be dead, and we wouldn't be having such a pleasant chat.*

"We know the system is in a hidden sector," the Half-Jaw continued, knitting his long fingers together in his lap. "One of many the San'Shyuum kept for themselves."

Now Tem couldn't resist: "And you want to know what's in it."

“I’d like to know what the only Prelate to survive the fall of High Charity deems so important that he would be willing to murder thousands of innocent Sangheili in order to protect it.” The Half-Jaw clenched his fingers tight. “Yes. I would like to know that.”

At the mention of High Charity, Tem’Bhetek’s anger exploded at the base of his skull. But he gritted his teeth and held his tongue . . . until the Half-Jaw took one step too far.

“Tell me what is in that sector, and your death will be quick and painless.”

Tem almost choked on his hatred. “Where was your mercy?” He strained against his manacles, ignoring the needling chemical aftertaste that warned him to remain still. “When you incinerated my family and everyone else inside the holy city?!”

“I cleansed an infestation.”

“The Flood?” the Prelate shouted in disgust. “They were just an excuse!”

“An excuse?”

“For you and all the other shipmasters to commit your final act of betrayal!”

“You speak nonsense.”

“*I speak the truth!*”

“Ah. Just like the Prophet?” The Half-Jaw leaned forward and angled one eye and his ruined jaw at the Prelate. “I don’t know which one of us was the bigger fool—me for believing Truth’s lies, or you for ignoring them.”

“I am no fool, and the Minister of Preparation will—!” Tem snapped his mouth shut. *Calm yourself, before you say too much!*

“Preparation?” The Half-Jaw wrapped his hands around the edge of the bench. “I’m surprised he made it out alive. By the time we breached the stalk, the Sacred Promissory was teeming with Flood. And the dome’s lower districts . . .”

The Half-Jaw paused and looked past the Prelate at a spot far beyond the walls of the cell. When he spoke again, the Prelate was surprised by how tired and regretful the Sangheili sounded.

“There were still San’Shyuum alive in their towers. We heard their transmissions, saw some of them in the air, trying to reach us. But the

parasite was thick around us then. We couldn't hold our position, although many Sangheili died trying. When I realized there was nothing more we could do, only then did I give the order to burn the city." The Half-Jaw met the Prelate's angry gaze. "I am sorry for your family. Believe me when I tell you that I would have saved them if I could."

The Prelate was stunned—not by the Half-Jaw's apology but by his admission. *There were still San'Shyuum alive in their towers. . . .* As much as the Prelate wanted to remain silent—as strongly as he suspected the Half-Jaw's sincerity was merely a ruse to get him to divulge more information—he couldn't help the words that slipped past his trembling lips: "You lie. There was no one alive in the city when I left it."

"Who told you that? The Minister of Preparation?" The Half-Jaw shook his head. "I'm telling you what I saw with my own eyes."

"My family. Is dead."

"Alas, they are. But not by my hand."

The Prelate did not—*could* not—believe anything the Half-Jaw said. Because if this Sangheili's account of the fall of High Charity was true, there was a chance he might have been able to rescue Yalar and his child. A chance that their blood was on his hands.

In this moment of sickening possibility, Tem'Bhetek felt more anger than he ever had before. Not at the Half-Jaw, but at himself.

"What is in this hidden sector?" the Half-Jaw asked again.

The Prelate lashed out, desperate to redirect his rage. "Exactly what you deserve!"

The Half-Jaw leaned back against the wall. After a long silence, he said: "Your ship, *Spear of Light* . . . do you know the song behind that name?"

The Prelate remembered the proud voices of the Sangheili prisoners kneeling before the ring. But his mind was reeling, and for a moment he imagined the prisoners singing Yalar's lullaby instead of their own, defiant tune.

Take my hand, walk with me . . .

Tem shuddered in his restraints. "Damn you. And damn your songs, Sangheili."

“The ballad of Kel ‘Darsam is very old,” the Half-Jaw persisted. “Something I learned as a child. There is one verse . . .”

And then the Half-Jaw sang.

Despite his ragged jaws, the words that came out in his native tongue were melodious and sweet. The Half-Jaw sang beautifully, in fact, and it made the Prelate hate him more than ever.

When the Half-Jaw was done with the verse, he translated it into standard Covenant: “*Kel ‘Darsam fell, spear in his back, down to the rocks where the waves did crack.*” The shipmaster shrugged. “No one really knows who killed Kel ‘Darsam. Some believe his enemy threw the spear. Others think it was his uncle—that the spear was a betrayal even that great warrior could not see before it struck him in the back.”

The Half-Jaw stared hard at the Prelate as he rose from the bench. “I’ve already set a course for the hidden sector. Before we arrive, you might want to reconsider who has told you the truth and who has not.”

The Prelate watched in mute fury as the Half-Jaw stepped to the cell’s energy field. The barrier shimmered a lighter shade of blue, and the Sangheili walked through it and out of sight.

“I hope your investigations went better than mine,” Rtas said to the Blademaster and the Unggoy, who were waiting in the guardroom outside the cell. Both still wore their battle armor. Vul ‘Soran was nervously fingering the twin hilts of his energy swords. Stolt was calmly holding his breath while he cleaned his mask. He toggled a valve with one of his thick thumbs, heard a satisfying hiss of methane, and then clipped the mask back into place.

“Well, the good news first, then,” the Blademaster said. “The Jiralhanae didn’t cause any damage to the reactors. Strange, I know. But none of those hairy curs is alive to tell us what they were thinking, so let’s just be thankful that we still have enough power for the slipspace drive.”

“And the bad news?” the Half-Jaw asked.

“All forward plasma cannons offline. Most lasers down, too,” Stolt

said. “This ship might look tough from far away. But it can’t fight.”

Rtas nodded his head, only half listening to his two lieutenants. His mind was churning over a new puzzle, courtesy of the Prelate: *Why would the Minister of Preparation, one of the San’Shyuum’s most brilliant Forerunner technologists, send the last living Prelate to capture my ship?* The Half-Jaw had no idea. But he had a strong suspicion that the answer he sought was waiting for him in the hidden sector.

Rtas fought the urge to rub the gash in his shoulder. The pain from the wound was intense, worse than he would ever let the Prelate or his own warriors know. And yet, once again, here he was, barely recovered from one battle and off to fight another. *I don’t know if I have the strength for this.* . . . And in this moment of weakness he went one step further: *If the Minister wants this old, worthless ship so badly? Fine. He can have it!*

This idea was, of course, ridiculous, self-indulgent, and a betrayal of the Sangheili warrior code. But instead of feeling a rush of embarrassment and regret, Rtas was oddly energized. The pain in his shoulder suddenly fell away as the Half-Jaw realized: he had been so busy staring at his enemies’ puzzles that he failed to notice that he held—had *always* held—the most important piece.

“I need volunteers,” the Half-Jaw said to Stolt. “Enough to manage a slipspace jump, but no more than we can fit into two Phantoms. Get the wounded and everyone else off of *Shadow of Intent* and down to Duraan’s surface.”

The Unggoy’s beady eyes crinkled with questions. But content in the knowledge that he’d just placed his own name at the top of the list of volunteers, Stolt grumbled his assent and trotted out of the guardroom, methane tank rattling on his back.

“The ballad of Kel ‘Darsam. . . . Haven’t heard that one sung in years.” The Blademaster glanced at the Prelate, brooding on the other side of the cell’s energy-field door. “Which do you think it was—spear in the front or in the back?”

“I don’t know,” Rtas said. “But we’re about to find out.”

Shadow of Intent slid forward, its hull reflecting the yellow, pink, and sapphire clouds of a nearby nebula that nearly filled the black horizon. As Rtas watched the colors shift across the carrier's glossy hull, he was reminded of the sea predators that prowled the tidelands near his childhood home, a keep on the edge of one of Sanghelios's warm equatorial oceans.

The carrier was headed for a dark world without a star—a rogue planet spun out from an unknown cataclysm long ago, which was now content to carve its own stubborn path across the galactic disk, ignoring the feeble tugs of distant suns.

Orbiting this planet was something that looked uncannily like a sea urchin, one of the clusters of needle-sharp spines that had bedeviled Rtas's explorations of his keep's shoreline at low tide.

Once, when Rtas was barely out of his first decade, stripped to nothing but his loincloth and scampering on rocks close to shore, looking for small fish to spear, the sea had pulled quickly back, exposing a previously unseen world of limestone ridges and valleys, shaped and sharpened by ages upon ages of crashing waves. In fact, the water had receded so fast that countless sea creatures Rtas had only ever seen bulging from the deep-water nets of the keep's fishing fleet were now caught unaware, trapped and splashing in rocky puddles much too shallow for their bulk.

For a young Sangheili hunter with ambitions that had outgrown the minuscule prey close to shore, this was a golden opportunity. Rtas had eagerly threaded his way through the limestone, spearing glistening creatures until his woven shore-grass shoulder bag hung wet and heavy across his back. But even then, he did not return to shore. There were pools farther out filled with even rarer prizes: snap-tails and electric kesh that now lay gasping on the rocks. Rtas picked his way out to these magnificent specimens, shouldered his spear, and stroked their scaly flesh, imagining he was taming them with nothing but his touch. . . .

Then Rtas had seen the wave—a dark wall of water on the horizon that grew taller by the second. He looked back at the high walls of his keep and was terrified to see how far he'd come. Entranced by the bounty of the pools, he'd clambered almost a kilometer offshore,

which would have been a quick sprint on even ground. But now his retreat was a razor-sharp maze, and by the time Rtas made it back across the rocky beach and limped through the water gate of his keep, his bare feet were swollen and burning with toxins from the urchins he'd been moving too fast to miss. His hands and knees bled from countless limestone cuts, and the sting of salt water in these wounds left him dizzy with pain.

Rtas hadn't thought of that day in decades. But the memory came back now, crystal clear, as he watched *Shadow of Intent* draw within a thousand kilometers of the orbital. Then, without warning, the urchin-like structure blazed brighter than the nebula behind it. And in that moment, something hit the Half-Jaw with a force far greater than the tsunami that had long ago crashed against the walls of his keep.

The energy wave, or whatever it was, slammed into the Half-Jaw's mind. One instant he had the complete memory of that day in the tide pools. The next moment he did not—and never would again. When the energy wave hit, the foremost thoughts in the Half-Jaw's mind were scoured clean. And when the light from the orbital finally faded from his eyes, Rtas was surprised to find he was screaming.

He was not the only one.

The pilot sitting beside him in the Phantom's cockpit was shouting a string of unintelligible words. At first Rtas thought he was talking in some alien tongue. But then he realized the pilot was speaking Sangheili and that, for a moment, the Half-Jaw had forgotten the language he had spoken all his life.

"C-calm down!" Rtas stuttered, reaching for the pilot's shoulder. But the Half-Jaw's arm was heavy, and it took tremendous concentration to move his hand, as if it some vital nerves had been severed and his brain was now threading a new path around the cut. "Can you . . . still control this ship?"

"Y-yes, Shipmaster," the pilot said. He was a ranger, the very picture of menace in his silver armor and vacuum-rated, full-face helmet. But he sounded like a frightened child, and when the sharp chirp of an emergency transmission rang from the cockpit control panel, the pilot grabbed his helmet and began to wail, rocking back and forth in his seat.

“Report!” Rtas shouted, stabbing a holographic switch to accept the transmission. The message was coming from the other Phantom, a few kilometers to starboard, and he expected to hear the Blademaster, who was serving as that dropship’s co-pilot.

But after a brief pause, it was the Scion who announced: “Shipmaster, we have c-casualties! I don’t know what . . . or h-how. . . .” She, too, was having trouble forming the right words. “Three r-rangers are unresponsive . . . and Vul ‘Soran as well.”

Rtas clenched his jaws. He had known a slipspace jump into the hidden sector was a dangerous move. But he and his navigation officer had carefully studied *Spear of Light*’s database and chosen an entry point far outside the volume of that cruiser’s previous arrivals and departures. As soon as *Shadow of Intent* had emerged from slipspace, Rtas had launched the two Phantoms. For several minutes, while the dropships had maintained what they hoped was a safe distance, the Half-Jaw had watched the carrier drift toward the orbital on the visor of his own full-face helmet. There was no crew aboard *Shadow of Intent*. It was now a decoy, piloted by its computational matrix, which was slaved to Rtas’s Phantom in the event that he needed to give the carrier different commands.

At some point, *Shadow of Intent* had crossed an invisible line, and the orbital had fired. And in that respect, the Half-Jaw’s plan had worked perfectly. If he or his crew had been on *Shadow of Intent* when the wave hit, they would all be incapacitated—or worse. In war, Rtas knew, there was always a price to pay for bold maneuvers. He thought of the Blademaster and his injured rangers and grimaced at the cost.

But it was about to go even higher.

The Half-Jaw heard the muffled discharge of a plasma pistol in his Phantom’s troop bay. Warning glyphs blazed on the cockpit control panel, and he punched another switch, opening a comm channel to the bay.

“Status!” he shouted, but there was no response. Rtas shrugged out of his shoulder harness and stepped groggily to the rear of the cockpit. He heard another plasma burst and felt the Phantom’s engines groan. The cockpit’s control panel suddenly shut down, and all interior lights went dark except for the violet emergency backups. By the time Rtas

had manually cycled through the troop bay door, he already knew what he would find.

Bringing the Prelate with them had been a calculated risk. While the Prelate had said no more about the Minister of Preparation following his initial interrogation—indeed, had said nothing else at all—it was clear to Rtas that the two San'Shyuum were partners in their scheme. If the Minister was truly here, the Half-Jaw had reasoned, he might be willing to negotiate for the Prelate's release, which might save *Shadow of Intent* from another fight. Rtas had mitigated the risk by keeping the Prelate restrained and putting him under the watchful eye of the Unggoy and the best of his rangers. But that hadn't been enough.

All of the Sangheili in the troop bay had been stunned by the energy wave and were either unconscious or struggling feebly in their harnesses. Stolt had wrestled free of his own shoulder harness, but was now facedown on the floor, his armor sparking from an overcharged plasma pistol shot. The Unggoy was trying to crawl toward the Prelate, who stood, wrists and ankles manacled together, at the center of the bay, near a smoking hole in the troop bay floor. The Prelate had stolen a plasma pistol from one of the unconscious Sangheili, and after blasting Stolt, he had pumped more plasma into a critical relay between the cockpit and the Phantom's engines. As soon as he saw Rtas, the Prelate steadied his stance and held down the pistol's trigger to build another overcharged bolt.

Rtas froze. He had his energy blade, but no ranged weapon. Yet instead of shooting the Half-Jaw, the black-armored San'Shyuum aimed the pistol at his own feet. A green bolt of superheated plasma splashed the Prelate's boots, instantly depleting his armor's energy shields—but also melting away his ankle manacles. A holographic meter near the pistol's rear sight flashed red, indicating the weapon's battery was depleted.

Seeing his opening, Rtas tore his energy blade from his belt and rushed across the troop bay. The Prelate tossed the pistol to the deck and for a moment seemed ready to meet the Half-Jaw's charge. But as Rtas brought his blade down in a vicious vertical slash, the Prelate quickly raised his hands, splayed wide apart—and Rtas's blade cut

clean through the Prelate's wrist manacles with an electric snap. The Prelate whirled aside to let his enemy pass, and as the Half-Jaw's momentum carried him to the back wall of the bay, the Prelate stepped calmly into the circular energy field that formed an airlock in the troop bay floor, and then dropped out of sight.

Rtas shoved away from the wall with an angry roar.

"Tried . . . to stop him," Stolt said, his voice weak in the Half-Jaw's helmet.

"It's all right," Rtas said, swallowing his temper. He holstered his blade and pulled a carbine rifle from a nearby weapon rack. "I'm going after him."

The Unggoy rose slowly to a knee. "I'm . . . c-coming with you."

"No. See to your rangers. Reestablish a connection with *Shadow of Intent*." Rtas stepped to the edge of the airlock. "If my transponder goes dark, tell the carrier to fire all remaining weapons . . . and destroy that orbital."

With that, he plunged through the field.

As Rtas entered the cold emptiness of space, there was no sound inside his helmet except his own uneven breaths. He fired his thrusters and stabilized his orientation so that he was facing the orbital, which was just off *Shadow of Intent*'s prow; a stark blossom of dark spines against the brilliant nebula. A bright chemical burst betrayed the Prelate's position as the San'Shyuum course-corrected and accelerated toward the orbital. Just as the Half-Jaw was about to do the same, his motion-tracker flashed, and Tul 'Juran appeared beside him, holding her energy lance.

Unlike the rangers, the Half-Jaw and the Scion didn't have thrusters integrated into their armor. But they had mounted ancillary units before the mission, and while Tul 'Juran had had only a short time to train, she managed a smooth stop beside Rtas, quickly corrected an incipient spin, and then said over a local comm channel: "He killed my k-kaidon and my kin . . . his life is mine to take."

"He killed many more than that . . . and he's not our only concern." The Half-Jaw pointed at the orbital. "We have to shut that down, before it fires again . . . or all the lives we've lost will be for nothing."

He and the Scion stared at each other through their thick polymer

visors, their faces covered with the luminous war paint of their reflected heads-up displays. The Scion nodded, and Rtas saw in her eyes that she understood.

This is bigger than me. This is bigger than the both of us.

Then, together, they fired their thrusters and rocketed after the Prelate.

"It's a trick!" the Prelate shouted. "Prepare the ring to fire again!" He was hurtling past *Shadow of Intent*, and at present speed would reach the installation in less than a minute. Tem'Bhetek didn't need to look behind to know the Half-Jaw would soon be upon him.

"What happened?!" The Minister of Preparation's thin, precise voice crackled in the Prelate's helmet. "I attempted to hail the carrier, but you did not respond!"

The Prelate knew the Minister had been expecting him to arrive in full control of *Shadow of Intent*. Tem didn't have the energy now to explain how the Half-Jaw and his warriors had departed the carrier just outside the prototype Halo's effective range—how he himself had been captured and then made his escape.

Tem's mind had also been rattled by the activation of the ring. But he had the advantage of knowing what was coming—had used his mental enhancements to blank his thoughts and let the crippling wave wash over him—and in this way recovered a few seconds faster than his ranger guards. He had clubbed the nearest Sangheili with his manacles, taken his plasma pistol, and then shot the Unggoy, who had been the quickest to regain his wits. But the Prelate saved all of this explanation for later and instead simply said:

"Just have the ring ready by the time I reach the bunker!"

There was a long pause. Nothing but static. The Prelate had never been this direct with the Minister. He thought he might have pricked the older San'Shyuum's pride, giving him an order like he was one of the Jiralhanae.

"I will fire when I see fit, Prelate," the Minister said, his voice suddenly cold. "Whether you have returned to the bunker or not."

Then he cut the connection.

The Prelate felt a gnawing doubt take a giant bite out of his resolve. After the Half-Jaw had told him his own version of events at High Charity, Tem had gone over and over Boru'a'Neem's description of events. *The Sacred Promissory is lost!* the Minister had said. *Nothing lives inside the city now except the Flood!* And in subsequent conversations, while Preparation had provided a few more details about the holy city's fall, they were mostly about his failed defense of the Promissory . . . nothing about events inside the dome.

At the time, because the Prelate had already been convinced of the Half-Jaw's guilt, he hadn't pressed the Minister. But having stared the Half-Jaw in the eye and heard the genuine remorse he showed for the Prelate's loss . . . things weren't as black-and-white as they used to be. And the Prelate's anger was only growing stronger in the gray.

Tem shot through a gap formed by four crossed spines, out of the nebula's light and into the installation's darkened interior. Unlike the energy fields on Covenant ships, the Forerunner structure had no visible separation between hard vacuum and atmosphere. *More magic we never understood. . . .*

But the Prelate didn't dwell on this. He throttled the output of his anti-grav belt and glided through a long diamond-shaped bay large enough to accommodate three Phantoms side by side. Following the course of a narrower, upward-sloping hall at the end of the bay, he soon emerged into the bright white expanse of the test chamber. The Minister was waiting for him, near the lift that led to the bunker. He was surrounded by Yanme'e—some stood awkwardly on the floor on their curved, clawed legs, and more used these limbs to cling to the chamber walls. There were at least two dozen of the Drones, all armed with plasma pistols and needle rifles.

The Prelate kept his voice relaxed as he eyed the Yanme'e's weapons. "What are those for?" He cut power to his anti-grav belt, alighted on the floor, and removed his helmet.

"In case you did not come alone," the Minister of Preparation said. He waved a hand, and the insectoid creatures lowered their guns. "Where is the Half-Jaw?"

"Alive and not far behind me. We should get to the bunker, charge

the ring . . .” The Prelate took a step toward the Minister, and as he did, Preparation drew back his throne. The move betrayed the subtle shimmer of the throne’s energy shield.

“Careful, Tem’Bhetek,” the Minister said. The Yanme’e’s feelers twitched, and their glowing eyes darted to the Minister’s fingers, watching for a signal. But Preparation’s hands remained still in the sleeves of his threadbare robe. “The device is . . . unstable,” the Minister continued. “It will not survive another firing.” The Prelate saw that the crack along the ring’s upper arc was much longer now; the circuits embedded in the rent had burned away, leaving a blackened cavity in the marble. “I cannot risk its destruction—not until we transport it to its final destination.”

“What do you mean?” the Prelate asked. To a certain extent, he was just keeping the conversation going, trying to work out a way to get the answers he wanted without rousing the Minister’s suspicion. But now he was truly curious. “Transport the ring to where?”

The Minister cocked his head to one side. He looked genuinely puzzled and disappointed that Tem hadn’t already guessed. “To Sanghelios, of course.”

Tem’Bhetek drew a long, slow breath. For him, revenge against the Half-Jaw had always been the end. He had really never considered what else the Minister might have planned. But now, after a few moments’ thought, Tem discerned Boru’a’Neem’s next step. “*Shadow of Intent* . . . You’re going to use its reactors to charge the ring.”

“*Spear of Light* was a noble ship and served its purpose well. But it was never strong enough to make it past Sanghelios’s defenses or to provide power to the ring.” The Minister stroked the fleshy wattle hanging from his chin. “I have been testing the device at only a fraction of its power. Even if we were to increase the pulse by twenty percent, that would be more than enough to wipe all sentient life from Sanghelios and its moons. We shall annihilate the Sangheili home system and set back their species for ages to come!”

“Surely whoever was on board *Shadow of Intent* would also perish in the pulse,” Tem said. “Who did you have in mind?”

“My finest Prelate, of course. But I have the distinct feeling he is not as . . . committed as he once was.”

“As I was when you told me my family was dead?”

The Minister pursed his lips. “So. We have come back around to that.”

Just then, two red lights flashed on the Prelate’s visor, his motion-tracker alerting him to a pair of hostile contacts nearing the installation. A similar warning flashed on the arm of the Minister’s throne.

“I’m afraid we do not have time for questions,” the Minister said.

“I have only one.”

“Do you want to know the truth, or what I knew you needed to hear?”

With that, the Prelate had his answer. His heart ached. *Oh, Yalar, forgive me . . .*

But he still needed to hear it. “Why lie to me, Boru’a’Neem?”

“Because I needed your anger—I needed your blind rage to see this through.”

“You took my family from me.”

Preparation slammed his fist on his throne. “You never would have had a family if not for me!” The wrinkled folds of skin on the Minister’s neck pulsed with his contempt. “I have listened to you endlessly mourn those two small deaths, but you have no idea how much value was lost! My Sacred Promissory held more priceless relics —more Forerunner wealth—than any other vault in the Covenant!” The Minister’s limbs trembled, and his voice was shrill. “You lost a wife and child? I lost *everything*!”

The Minister’s words hit the Prelate harder than any wounds he’d ever received in battle. Under this verbal assault, his enhancements had triggered automatically, and his body was tensed to defend itself. But now the galvanizing rage that always accompanied these preparations was gone.

The Prelate felt empty, and his voice was hollow. “I did everything you asked of me. I saved your life,” he said.

“There were not many San’Shyuum who could match your skills or your devotion—and now perhaps there are none.” The Minister flared the sleeves of his robe and settled his arms softly on his throne. “But we are not the only ones who escaped the Holy City, and there will be

many, full of rage or hungry for glory, who will gladly take your place." All the artifice dropped from the Minister's voice; his words were flat and final. "I don't need you anymore."

With a twitch of his fingers, Preparation signaled the Yanme'e to open fire. The chamber filled with plasma bolts and needlelike explosive shards, all directed at the Prelate. But even though Tem'Bhetek was in motion before these lethal rounds were in the air, he was not the first thing to reach the Minister's throne.

An energy lance arced over the Prelate's head and struck the Minister's shield, dead center. The shield knocked the lance aside, but then wavered and collapsed. Immediately after, two carbine bursts cooked past the Prelate, hitting the Minister between his right shoulder and the base of his neck.

Then the Prelate ran into a wall of Yanme'e fire impossible to dodge. His own shields fell. He felt one plasma bolt boil into his thigh and a needle hit below his ribs and then explode out his back. As he tumbled toward the ring, Tem saw the Minister accelerate backward in his throne and into the bunker lift, frantically clasping his wound as pale red blood pumped through his fingers. Boru'a'Neem locked eyes with the Prelate one last time. Then the saw-toothed door to the lift closed and the Minister was gone.

"Leave him!" Rtas shouted as the Scion sprinted for the Prelate. "Kill those Yanme'e!"

The Half-Jaw shot one Drone out of the air, and as it dropped, the Scion slid onto her knees, scooped up its plasma pistol, and came up firing. By the time the two Sangheili had made it to the ring, the greasy remains of seven more Yanme'e were smeared on the floor or dripping down the walls. Some of the Drones had retreated to the bunker lift, where they found cover behind its door frame, which protruded out from the chamber wall. More were buzzing in the highest reaches of the chamber, leaping back and forth between the support beams, trying to find the best angles for their shots.

Crouching beside the Scion at the base of the ring, Rtas eyed the

ammunition counter on his carbine. “I have ten rounds left!”

The Scion inspected her pistol. “Less than a quarter charge!”

“Get your lance! I’ll cover you!”

As the Scion leapt into the open, Rtas briefly considered the onyx relic pressed against his back. It was shocking to be so close to a Halo ring again. And while it would have been easy to mistake its small scale for a lack of power, the Half-Jaw knew from the conversation he had just overheard between the Minister and the Prelate: *If I fail, and they bring this infernal ring aboard my ship, Sanghelios will be lost!*

Rtas stood and fired past the Scion, braining two Yanme’e who had just stuck their heads out from behind the door frame. Then he aimed upward, killing the first of a trio of Drones swooping down for an attack. The two other Yanme’e scattered, and the Half-Jaw and the Scion, now with lance in hand, ducked back behind the ring.

“The Minister of Preparation is through that door!” Rtas said as angry shots from the dozen or so remaining Yanme’e sizzled overhead.

The Scion took a quick glance over the lower arc of the ring. “There’s a control panel. On the left side of the frame!”

Neither of them had any idea if they would be able to manipulate the Forerunner door controls; undoubtedly the Minister had locked the door from the other side. But both Sangheili knew they were now sitting right beside the very device that had nearly wiped their minds clean. And if the Minister was preparing to unleash another wave . . .

“Stay close!” Rtas activated his energy blade. “Don’t stop until we make it to the door!”

Tul ‘Juran nodded as she gave her lance a shake. The tips of the weapon crackled diamond bright.

Then, together, they stepped out from behind the ring.

The two Sangheili were blurs of glittering light as they whirled their blades around themselves, deflecting the Yanme’e’s fire. They cut apart a group of Drones that dove from above and made it halfway to the grav-lift door when the ring suddenly powered on behind them with a deep, almost inaudible hum that shook their skulls inside their helmets—a terrifying sensation that stopped them in their tracks. Rtas and Tul ‘Juran braced against each other, back to back, growing panic limiting their urges to either fight or flight. Neither seemed ideal.

Meanwhile, the Yanme'e were just as unnerved as the two Sangheili. All the Drones that remained were now clawing at the door, ignoring the Forerunner control panel and its pulsing glyphs. Rtas scowled. *If they don't know how to open it, how will we?* At the same time, what chance did they have to outrun this Halo ring? The Half-Jaw could feel the Scion's body shudder as the relic's rising wave pulsed against her mind—could feel his own thoughts start to slip.

Why else would I imagine someone . . . singing?

But then Rtas recognized the voice, and he knew the song was real.

During the firefight, the Prelate had dragged himself to the shaft beside the ring that led down to the installation's power systems. Resting with his back against the low wall that circled the shaft, the Prelate was now staring at the spot on the floor before the ring where his Sangheili prisoners had once stood.

As the Prelate gently sang lilting San'Shyuum verses Rtas didn't understand, he slowly unfastened his anti-grav belt and wrapped it around a satchel of plasma grenades that he had recovered from the corpse of a nearby Yanme'e. When this explosive bundle was gathered in his lap, the Prelate ceased his song. He laughed ruefully and coughed: "Why *not* sing at a time like this . . ." Then he rose partway up the wall, and looked directly at the Half-Jaw.

"The spear was always in my back," the Prelate said. Arm shaking, he held his bundle out over the shaft. "I wish I'd felt it sooner."

Rtas had a vague idea what the Prelate meant, but the pulse from the ring was overwhelming now, and he was losing the ability to think, let alone speak, clearly. He gave the Prelate a grateful nod and grabbed the Scion by the shoulder. Then they activated their thrusters and raced away from the ring.

Tem'Bhetek waited until the Half-Jaw and female Sangheili were out of the test chamber before he dropped his belt. The bundle clattered against the wall of the shaft, once twice, and then continued its descent in silence. The Prelate slid down the barrier, leaving a smear of blood from the gaping hole in his armor, and settled, legs akimbo.

He pulled his hands into his lap. Without a weapon to hold, they felt uncomfortably empty.

He closed his eyes and whispered: “This path. Where did it lead?”

“To me, my love . . .”

Slowly, the Prelate opened his eyes. Yalar stood before him, her thin yellow gown fluttering in the ring’s invisible waves.

“It led to us.”

Then there was a weight in Tem’s arms; a warm and fussy wriggling. He looked down and saw his child. “What is it?” he asked. “Boy or girl?”

His wife smiled. “Whatever you want it to be.”

The ring’s silhouette wavered as it began its final charging cycle. The Prelate felt his mind slipping . . . but he willed his enhancements into a final barricade.

Please, just a little more time . . .

Yalar glanced at the ring.

“It’s all a lie,” Tem said, choking back a sob. “It won’t take us anywhere.”

His baby laughed.

Yalar held out her hand. “How do you know for sure?”

Gritting his teeth, the Prelate rose. He took Yalar’s soft fingers in his armored glove. Then, wife in one arm and child in the other, he limped toward the ring.

Tem felt the floor shudder beneath his feet as his belt finally detonated far below. A hot wind roared at his back. He was close to the ring now, and his defenses were crumbling. But the strange thing was, as all the sensations of the real world began to fade, the ghosts in his arms seemed more real than ever.

“I’m frightened,” Tem said.

Yalar leaned close, kissed his neck, and whispered in his ear: *“Into the light, forever free!”*

In that moment, the Prelate remembered happiness, love, contentment—all the joys they shared before . . . and then he knew nothing else.

Shadow of Intent hung in high orbit above Duraan. Most of the carrier's crew was on the planet, recovering from their wounds or simply enjoying the hospitality of the grateful settlers. Rtas 'Vadum, however, was alone on the command deck, except for the flickering image of another Sangheili in the holo-tank. Tall and proud, but with a weariness in his shoulders not unlike that of the Half-Jaw, this Sangheili wore dark gray, ornately carved armor that looked even older than his strong, serious face.

". . . and then the installation exploded, before the ring had an opportunity to fire a second time," Rtas was saying, adding the last details to what had been a long and extensive debrief. "We scanned every fragment. There was nothing to recover."

"Then Sanghelios is safe," the Arbiter said. "And all of us are in your debt."

The Half-Jaw shook his head. "I did not do it alone."

"No, of course not," the Arbiter said. "The warriors who were with you at the ring. Are they recovering?"

"Slowly, but surely. The Blademaster was the worst, but even he is awake now and back to his usual bellowing." Rtas stepped closer to the tank. "In fact, he wanted to speak with you. To discuss the revocation of certain naval codes . . . specifically those forbidding the enlistment of female crew."

The Arbiter chuckled deep in his throat. "I hoped your voyage would be restful, but I never thought Vul 'Soran would find it *that* relaxing." Then, serious once more: "The time has come to change many of our old ways. This Scion is very welcome on your crew. I look forward to meeting her and honoring her. When will you leave Duraan?"

"Ten days, perhaps twenty," Rtas said. "But we will not be returning to Sanghelios."

The Half-Jaw thumbed the control panel in the railing around the holo-tank and transmitted an annotated report on *Spear of Light*'s navigational database. His officers had since completed a more thorough study and uncovered evidence of a rendezvous of San'Shyuum vessels after the fall of High Charity. It had been a sizable flotilla, enough to carry thousands of San'Shyuum. Although the

details were fragmentary at best, there were slipspace signatures to follow, trajectories to track—the beginnings of a long hunt, for someone with the spirit to undertake it.

"High Charity . . ." the Arbiter said, when he'd finished reading the report. "So Preparation wasn't the only snake who slithered out of that nest."

"There will be others like him," Rtas said. "Hiding, scheming."

"Someone will have to stop them." The Arbiter clasped his hands behind his back. "But it does not have to be you, Rtas 'Vadum. Many shipmasters have given up their commands, returned to their keeps here to farm the land or fish the seas. Sanghelios needs wise leaders, now more than ever. I would never order you to leave *Shadow of Intent*. But know that if you do, no one will doubt your bravery or commitment."

Rtas grasped the railing of the holo-tank. Through it, he could feel the distant rumble of the carrier's reactors—the familiar rhythm of his ship. *It would be difficult to give this up . . . but to be done with war entirely? To rest and let someone else carry on the fight?*

The Arbiter's offer was tempting, and the Half-Jaw almost took it. But then there was the matter of the Prelate's final, selfless act.

"There will be some San'Shyuum who deserve the full measure of our fury," Rtas said at last, "and others who will not. I would like the opportunity to try to sort one from the other, if I can."

"And so you shall, then," the Arbiter said. "I cannot think of anyone more qualified for such a vital mission." He paused, clearly reluctant to sever the transmission. "I will expect regular reports." And then, finally: "Until we meet again . . ."

". . . In Urs's everlasting light." The Half-Jaw finished the traditional good-bye, and the holo-tank went blank.

As he stood there in *Shadow of Intent*'s armored heart, Rtas 'Vadum thought:

Maybe, in the end, this was the best that any warrior could hope for. A chance to reconcile with your enemy, or, failing that, to fall in the pursuit of peace.

This thought energized Rtas, and for the first time in a long while, he did not dread the coming battles. Because although he wasn't

certain where this new voyage would take him or what dangers he might face along the way, Rtas could see more than one ending, and that gave him the will to start.

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